

SEABIRD ISLANDS

No. 100

Lawrence Rocks, Victoria

Location: 38°25'S., 141°40'E., 2 km offshore from Point Danger and about 6 km south-east from Portland, Vic.

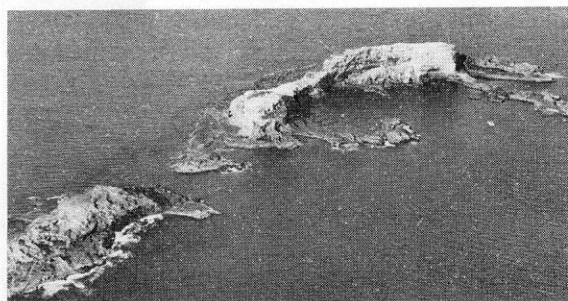
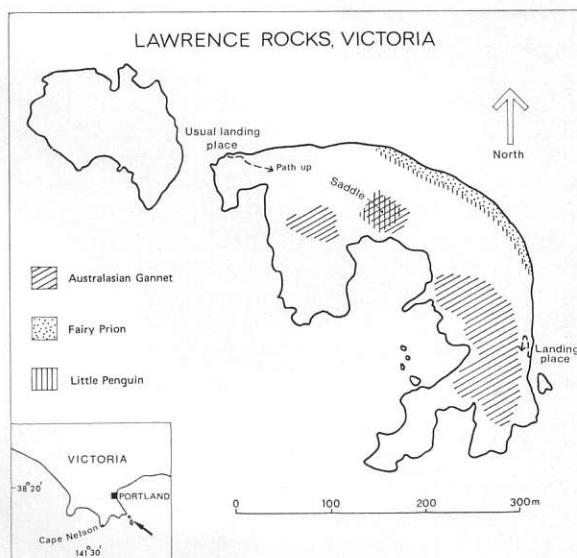
Other Names: Lawrence Islands, Ile Du Dragon⁶ (formerly); The Gannets (by fishermen locally).

Status: A Wildlife Reserve under the management of the Fisheries and Wildlife Division within the Conservation Ministry of Victoria.

Description: Lawrence Rocks consist of two islands, the larger about 6.8 ha and the smaller 1.5 ha; they are separated by a channel some 50 m wide through which the sea runs hard, particularly in rough weather. The main island is crescent-shaped and concave to the south-west, the direction from which the prevailing winds and wave action have extensively eroded the rock-face to create a complex indented outline. The sheltered north-east face is a relatively uniform crescent profile. The main island has a base centre-line length of about 800 m and an average width of some 90 m with the highest point about 30 m above mean sea level. The smaller island is roughly oval in shape, and about 180 m by 90 m with the highest point about 10 m above m.s.l.; it lies off the western tip of the main island.

J. A. Coulson³ described the islands as follows—“Lawrence Rocks, which are one mile offshore from Point Danger and project about 80 feet above sea-level, have a basaltic foundation upon which rest beds of yellow tuff about 50 feet thick. Wave-cut benches up to 200 yards wide and 3 feet above water-level have been cut in the basalt”. He made no mention of the guano capping which in 1860 was estimated to contain some 7 000 tonnes available for removal⁷.

Apart from the guano, the surface is mostly rock but the saddle “is composed of loose soil



• Lawrence Rocks (looking east).

Photo: Courtesy of Portland Harbour Trust.

covered by a growth of *Mesembryanthemum*¹⁴ and exotic grasses. The Australian Hollyhock *Lavatera plebeia* has colonised parts of the lower scree slopes but individual plants support a population of small grasshoppers which seriously impede their growth rate.

Landing: Onto the rock platform at the north-west tip of the main island and difficult even in calm weather, due to the inevitable ocean swell. A second but rarely used landing place at the south-east end also permits access to the main ridge.

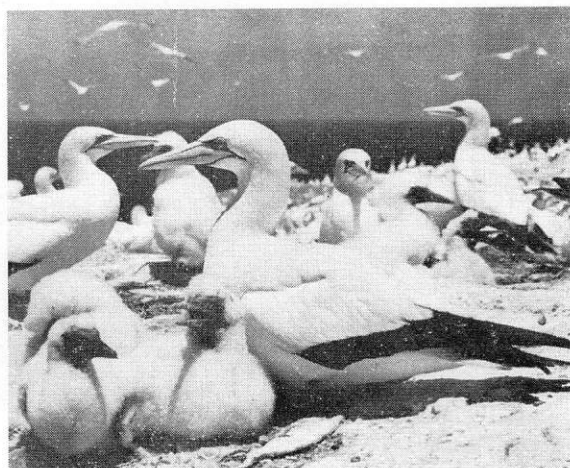
Ornithological History: Reports during the first half of the last century referred to the presence of a large nesting colony of seabirds on "The Rocks" which had produced considerable quantities of guano. However, the first ornithologist to visit Lawrence Rocks was Dr W. MacGillivray in December 1900¹⁴. A. H. E. Mattingley⁹ camped overnight in December (presumably) 1907, and read a paper on his observations before the Field Naturalists Club of Victoria on 9 March 1908. Mattingley noted the presence on the smaller island of a large nesting colony of cormorants *Phalacrocorax gouldi* [= *Leucocarbo fuscescens*] "sitting on their columnar-shaped nests, and when we passed close to them, the brooding birds waddled off their eggs". He also recorded Little Penguins, Short-tailed Shearwaters and "Dove-like Prion, *Prion desolatus*" [= Fairy Prion *Pachyptila turtur*] nesting, and "some 400 Gannets attending their young ones". In 1937, Professor F. Wood Jones¹⁴ gave details of a visit he made to the island on 28 November 1935, but the first detailed report on the Australasian Gannets at Lawrence Rocks was made by J. L. McKean⁸ in 1966.

Breeding Seabirds and Status

Eudyptula minor Little Penguin — nests among the fallen boulders at the base and lower levels of the cliffs or on the "Saddle" of the main island. Laying probably commences in August but may be protracted. Most young would have left by early in January, but some birds may be ashore throughout the year. Estimated < 100 breeding pairs.

Pachyptila turtur Fairy Prion — In December 1900, MacGillivray spoke of the burrows of the prions being present in "hundreds"¹⁴ but in November 1935, the estimate was "not more than 100 breeding pairs"¹⁴. A later report, about 1962, recorded that there were probably less than 200 pairs nesting on "The Rocks". Probably present to breed from late in August or early September until the young depart in February.

Puffinus tenuirostris Short-tailed Shearwater — Recorded breeding on the island in small num-



• Part of the gannet colony.

bers in 1907⁹ and in 1935¹⁴. A report about 1962 stated that the species "surprisingly does not nest on Lawrence Rocks. However, a number of non-breeders roost on The Rocks at night"¹². Possibly a few may still breed on the island though the nesting habitat is mostly unsuitable for burrowing.

Pelecanoides urinatrix Common Diving-Petrel — An almost fledged bird was found in December 1978*.

Morus serrator Australasian Gannet — Breeds from October to early May with nests located on the higher part of the main island. The population was recorded by McKean⁸ as increasing from 40 breeding pairs in October 1952, to 605 in December 1960 and 639 in December 1961. In December 1978*, 1456 occupied nests were counted.

Leucocarbo fuscescens Black-faced Shag — Recorded breeding on the smaller island in large numbers in 1907⁹, and Wood Jones¹⁴ stated that ". . ., the inner island is a bare rock and forms a rookery for thousands of shags." Apparently these are the only breeding records, and presuming they are correct, the reason for the abandonment of colony is puzzling. The VORG report in 1962¹² referred only to roosting of this and the other four cormorant species.

* Harris, M. P. (1979), *Unpublished Report. The Seabirds of the Victorian Islands. A report to the Ministry for Conservation, Victorian State Government.*

— Hon. Asst. Editor.