

SEABIRD ISLANDS

No. 197

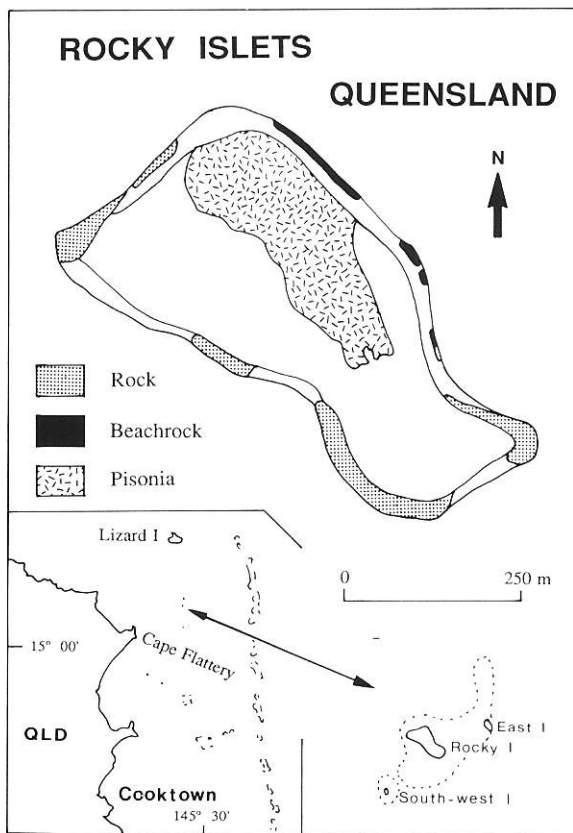
Rocky Islets, Great Barrier Reef, Queensland

Location: 14°51'S., 145°29'E.; 21 kilometres south-south-east of Lizard Island and 19 kilometres from the closest mainland, Cape Flattery, Queensland.

Status: Queensland National Park.

Description: Rocky Islets group comprises three islands referred to here as Rocky Islet, East Islet and South-west Islet. Rocky Islet, the central, largest of the three is 750 m × 300 m; it is well vegetated, with a large stand of *Pisonia grandis* on a low sandy area abutting a massive rocky outcrop 46 m high. Other vegetation consists of closed scrub and a small amount of grassland. The islet to the east (East Islet) is 15 m high and vegetated by a low, dense shrub layer, while the smallest islet to the south-west (South-west Islet) is 10 m high and has a sparse herb vegetation. Neither of these latter islands has a beach.

Landing: Approach to the group is best made from the north-western quarter. The reef is a crescent-shaped drying reef that occurs extensively between the islands. Landing on the two smaller islets is difficult unless seas are calm. Rocky Islet has beaches on the northern and southern sides, and landing depends on the state of tides and wind. On the northern side scouring has exposed beachrock, which may hamper landing. Anchorage during the south-east trade-wind season is reliable but rocky.



Ornithological History: Somerville⁴, in his account of survey work carried out in the Lizard Island area, described his visit to "a certain low rocky island about 12 miles from where the ship has her base" (i.e., Lizard Island). This location plus his description of the island and its reef, leaves little doubt that he was at Rocky Islets. No dates are supplied in this account but Ingleton² recorded the survey by HMS *Dart* from the Hope Islands to the Turtle Group being carried out during the first half of 1889.

Somerville⁴ made virtually no reference to the island fauna though he did recount a mysterious tale of rushing winds and dark shapes in the night sky. On speculation these encounters could have been with Wedge-tailed Shearwaters which arrive under the cloak of darkness.

Domm¹ gave the first account of seabirds of the islands from his visits between 1973 and 1976. He drew attention to three important features: 1. the largest of the Rocky Islets is the only island in the area on which *Pisonia grandis* is found; 2. it is the only island in the area where the Wedge-tailed Shearwater nests; and 3. it is frequented by large numbers of White-capped [Black] Noddies which roost there at night. Further observations for this paper were made by G. C. Smith during visits from 13–14 February 1982, 27–29 April 1983, on 11 November 1983 and 5 February 1986.

Breeding Seabirds and Status

Puffinus pacificus Wedge-tailed Shearwater — Domm¹ estimated 1 000 burrows on Rocky Islet. Smith estimated 990 burrows in "current and recent use" in 1983, but this count did not include burrows occurring away from the *Pisonia* forest. Adults or young, or both were encountered in burrows on all visits. A pullus in down was found in a burrow in February 1982; pulli, including a few that looked sick, and adults (at night) were noted in April 1983; three adults were noted in burrows in November 1983. During the 1985–86 breeding season, Wedge-tailed Shearwaters were commonly seen individually and in large rafts in the waters around Lizard Island. Investigation of burrows during the brief visit in February 1986 revealed only three young, although dead pulli on the surface were common.

Sterna sumatrana Black-naped Tern — Eggs were found in February 1982 on South-west Islet. These had been laid on the rock substrate and were not associated in any way with any of the vegetation on the island. Each of the nests was surrounded by small pebbles, pieces of coral shingle and shells. Ten adult birds were seen on South-west Islet and 50 on East Islet on this occasion.

Sterna anaethetus Bridled Tern — Large numbers of Bridled Terns have nested on all three islands of the Rocky Islets Group in each year on record. Domm¹ recorded about 300 nests each summer, although >1 000 birds were seen in the late afternoon in February 1982. Birds vacate the island and surrounding waters during the non-breeding period. Breeding activity appears to be from November to February. Courtship activity was seen on 11 November 1983 and eggs were found as late as 14 February 1982.

Sterna bergii Crested Tern — Two eggs were found on South-west Islet in February 1982. Twenty adults were counted on this islet prior to landing. Four were later noted at the East Islet. During a stay on Rocky Islet, Crested Terns were frequently observed feeding in the shallows close to the beach on the northern side.



● Oblique view of Rocky Islet (looking north-east) with East Islet in the background at right.

Photo: P. Ogilvie

Factors Affecting Status

The *Pisonia* forest on Rocky Islet is very similar to that of islands of the Capricorn-Bunker Group where Black Noddies nest in dense colonies. Despite the highly suitable habitat available for nesting, there have been no records. Each night thousands of Black Noddies and Common Noddies arrive after dark to roost in the *Pisonia* trees but then disperse in the early morning. It is evident that they forage well out to sea during the day, as few birds can be found in the vicinity. It could be that Black Noddies only nest here in exceptionally good feeding years and this may affect the status of this island.

As far as human effects are concerned, one significant find on Rocky Islet was the presence of "a collection of ramshackle and deserted wooden huts" with associated vegetable gardens and a well⁴. Some faded writing on a piece of note paper revealed that this was a baracoon — a place where the blackbirders held native labourers illicitly taken from the Pacific islands. Undoubtedly, such people would be required to obtain as much food as possible from the island and its reef. Seabirds and their eggs would certainly have been a prime source of food. Like his predecessors, Somerville⁴ and his men dined on birds. He remarked "Groups of large black-and-white pigeons, in bands of 10 and 12 birds, usually came flying over from the mainland in the afternoons, and paused for a breather on our trees". Possibly many of them were not breathing much longer after they alighted.

Currently Rocky Islets are protected by National Park status and the surrounding reef by Marine Park Buffer Zone status. Yachts and other pleasure craft occasionally call in. The main influence of humans these days might be the danger to Wedge-tailed Shearwater adults and/or chicks by visitors walking through the colony and collapsing burrows in the soft sand.

A pair of White-bellied Sea-Eagles *Haliaeetus leucogaster* which are evidently residents of the islands possibly predate Wedge-tailed Shearwaters as they do in the Capricorn-Bunker Group³.

Other Seabirds Recorded

<i>Sula leucogaster</i>	Brown Booby
<i>Larus novaehollandiae</i>	Silver Gull
<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>	Caspian Tern
<i>Sterna bengalensis</i>	Lesser Crested Tern
<i>Anous stolidus</i>	Common Noddy
<i>Anous minutus</i>	Black Noddy

Banding

Nil.

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4. Somerville, Boyle (1982). *The Chart-makers*. William Black and Son, Edinburgh and London.

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