

SEABIRD ISLANDS

No. 200

North Reef Island, Great Barrier Reef, Queensland

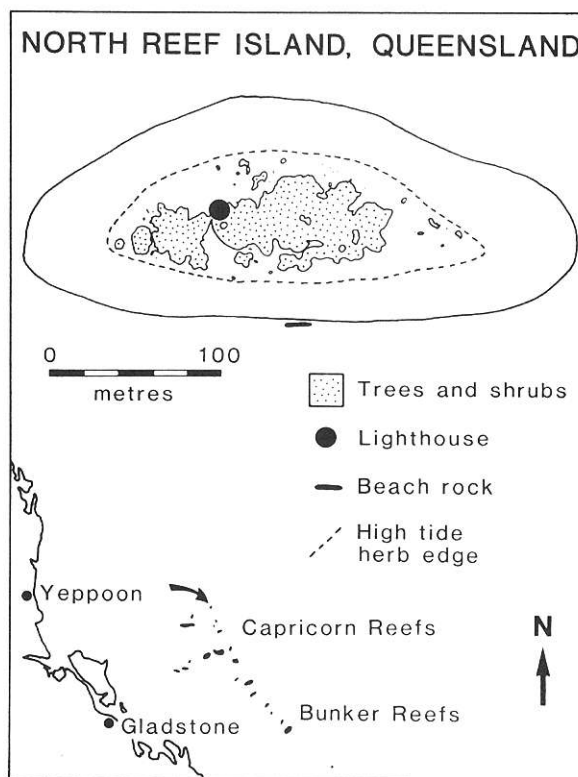
Location: 23°11'S., 151°54'E.; situated on the northern reef of the Capricorn Group at the southern end of the Great Barrier Reef, Queensland. The nearest mainland is 100 km to the south-west at Gladstone.

Status: Commonwealth Lighthouse Reserve.

Description: 1.4 ha; 220 m × 80 m (measured above high tide). This sand cay is presently situated west of the centre of a 250 ha reef but is known to have moved large distances in previous decades^{3,9}. A lighthouse is present and the cay is wooded primarily with *Argusia argentea* and *Scaevola sericea* less than 4 m high. There is a grove of *Pandanus* trees west of the lighthouse. Two small *Pisonia grandis*, four *Casuarina equisetifolia* and two *Cocos nucifera* trees are also present. Ten non-woody species were present in May 1987: *Thuarea involuta*, *Boerhavia tetrandra*, *Cakile edentula*, *Achyranthes aspera*, *Lepturus repens*, *Ipomea pes-caprae*, *Bidens pilosa*, *Portulaca oleracea*, *Cassitha filiformis* and *Sporobolus virginicus*⁹.

Landing: Across the reef at high tide usually at the north-western, western or south-western side of the cay. The anchorage is poor during rough seas.

Ornithological History: The island was visited by an R.A.O.U. expedition in 1910 but observations were not published for any species except Eastern Reef Egrets^{1,2}. K. Hulsman⁵ surveyed seabirds on 9 February 1983 and S. G. Lane for Hulsman, on



9 January 1984. Walker and Domm⁸ recorded birds on 18 visits from February 1983 to August 1984 and from December 1984 to February 1986. T. Walker recorded birds on ten occasions between May 1986 and May 1987.

Breeding Seabirds and Status

Phalacrocorax melanoleucos Little Pied Cormorant — Roughly a dozen frequent the cay — maximum 21. They are shy and fly to remains of a shipwreck on the reef when people go ashore. Seven nests were present in *Argusia* trees in the centre of the cay during March 1983⁸.

Egretta sacra Eastern Reef Egret — 'Scores' were present in 1910^{1,2}. Numbers fluctuate but usually 70–80 inhabit the cay. Fewer than 15 are grey birds and the rest are white. Searches in 1986–87 found nesting from September to March with fewer than 10 pairs nesting at any time. Nests are built in *Argusia*, *Scaevola* and *Pandanus* trees.

Haematopus fuliginosus Sooty Oystercatcher — A pair were present on half of the surveys. In September 1986 a nest with two eggs was present under an *Argusia* tree at the western end of the cay.

Sterna dougallii Roseate Tern — Six and 24 nested with colonies of Black-naped or Crested Terns in 1982–83 and 1983–84 respectively^{5,8}. There was no nesting in 1985–86 or 1986–87. None was present during the winter months.

Sterna sumatrana Black-naped Tern — About 30 appeared to be nesting in March 1983 on the south side of the lightstation. In January 1984 about 40 were nesting with colonies of Crested and Roseate Terns south of the lightstation and at the eastern end of the cay. In February 1986 there were 46 nests with eggs or hatchlings⁷. The colony was at the north-western side of the cay with odd nests at the eastern and western ends. There was no nesting in the 1986–87 season although 100 birds were present in December. A few were often present during the non-breeding months.

Sterna bergii Crested Tern — A colony on the south side of the lightstation in February 1983 was attended by at least 950 birds of which 410 pairs had chicks⁵. Two colonies totalling about 1 500 birds commenced in December 1983 south of the lightstation and at the western end of the cay. There were no colonies in 1985–86 or in 1986–87.

Factors Affecting Status

The lighthouse was inhabited until 1979 and the residents kept domestic poultry and a cat on the cay^{3,4}. The occupation by lighthouse keepers probably is the reason that Bridled Terns and White-bellied Sea-Eagles *Haliaeetus leucogaster* do not nest there. Both species nest or nested on all other Capricorn islands except where human interference occurred. The automatic lighthouse received six-weekly helicopter visits by maintenance staff until August 1987 when solar power was installed. Landing of helicopters on such a small cay could have devastating effects on ground-nesting terns and other birds.

A White-bellied Sea-Eagle occasionally visits, and the remains of shearwaters and noddies are present under feeding roosts. Tern colonies are susceptible to damage from turtles coming ashore to nest. In 1954 lighthouse keepers reported that all tern nests were destroyed by turtles each year⁶.

Other Seabirds Recorded

<i>Puffinus pacificus</i>	Wedge-tailed Shearwater (dead only)
<i>Sula leucogaster</i>	Brown Booby (rare on cay)
<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	Great Cormorant (1 record)
<i>Phalacrocorax varius</i>	Pied Cormorant (2 records)
<i>Phalacrocorax sulcirostris</i>	Little Black Cormorant (rare)
<i>Fregata ariel</i>	Least Frigatebird (2 records on cay)
<i>Ardea novaehollandiae</i>	White-faced Heron (rare)
<i>Haematopus longirostris</i>	Pied Oystercatcher
<i>Larus novaehollandiae</i>	Silver Gull
<i>Sterna anaethetus</i>	Bridled Tern (1 record)
<i>Sterna albifrons</i>	Little Tern
<i>Sterna bengalensis</i>	Lesser Crested Tern
<i>Anous minutus</i>	Black Noddy

Banding

Sterna dougallii — 1 fledgling
Sterna sumatrana — 1 runner
Sterna bergii — 44 runners



● North Reef Island from the air (looking south).

Photo: T. A. Walker

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