

SHORT CONTRIBUTION

**A VISIT TO DISTANT CAY,
SWAIN REEFS, GREAT BARRIER REEF,
QUEENSLAND**

Distant Cay (21°06'S., 152°29'E.) is in the northern sector of Swain Reefs, at the southern end of the Great Barrier Reef, Queensland, and it is the farthest vegetated cay from the mainland on the Australian continental shelf. It is about 100 m long by about 35 m wide. There are no previously published ornithological records for this cay.

Because of its remote situation in the Swain Reefs, and as there was no previous knowledge of seabirds breeding on it, the cay has not been included in earlier study visits to the Swain Reefs complex.

On 6 March 1987, T. A. Walker (pers. comm.), from an aerial survey, identified Brown Boobies *Sula leucogaster* and Masked Boobies *S. dactylatra* sitting on Distant Cay, apparently nesting. In company with H. Heatwole and others, I visited Distant Cay in January 1989 as part of an ongoing survey of cays and reefs in the Swain Reefs complex. Landings were made on Distant Cay for 1.5 hours on 23 January and for one hour on 24 January. Many birds were present on the shore line around the island when the ship anchored in the lee of the reef at the western end of the cay. As the approach was made by dinghy, most of these, estimated at over 500, flew off and disappeared. This group included Brown Boobies, Common Noddies *Anous stolidus* (about 100-200) and many small terns which could not be identified in the conditions. A count of the remaining birds was carried out from the dinghy as it circumnavigated the cay. Because of the very choppy conditions, a high degree of accuracy was impossible and the figures are mainly estimates. Present were Common Noddies (500+), Brown Boobies (30), Masked Boobies (5), Black-naped Terns *Sterna sumatrana* (about 250), a single Roseate Tern *S. dougallii*, three Silver Gulls *Larus novaehollandiae* and 12 Ruddy Turnstones *Arenaria interpres*.

After landing, a check was made of the birds breeding on the top of the cay. Brown Boobies were nesting and one female was incubating two eggs. There were five single downy chicks and four juveniles. Most of these young birds were accompanied by one or two adults at varying times throughout the visits but at least one adult was usually in attendance with the downy chicks. Dried remains of two downy chicks were found. The nests were either among clumps of *Boerhavia* or on coral rubble. The five Masked Boobies were standing among the nesting Brown Boobies, rather indicating nesting territories. Their peak breeding occurs in winter.

A few Black-naped Terns were nesting at one end near the top of the cay, adjacent to small clumps of *Boerhavia*. Three nests contained two eggs each, two contained one egg, and a small downy chick was found hiding in the *Boerhavia*. Another isolated nest with two eggs was situated among coral rubble near the limit of vegetation at the opposite end of the cay. The eggs were laid on the coral rubble. While examining the group of nests, a second chick walked across the rubble some 30 metres away and was promptly taken by a Silver Gull.

The dried remains of a Crested Tern *S. bergii* were also present on the top of the cay.

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