

SEABIRD ISLANDS

No. 266

Newman Island, Easter Group, Houtman Abrolhos, Western Australia

Location: 28°51'49"S, 113°59'43"E; 57 kilometres west of Geraldton, Western Australia. Located 4.2 kilometres north of Pelsaert Island, the largest of the islands in the Pelsaert Group, Houtman Abrolhos.

Status: Houtman Abrolhos Islands Reserve No. A20253, vested under the Land Act 1933 (WA) with the Minister for Fisheries for conservation of flora and fauna, tourism and for purposes associated with the fishing industry.

Description: Newman Island (6.1ha) is 725 metres long and up to 230 metres wide, although it averages 60 metres in width and is three metres above MHSW.

The geology is a composite island structure¹. It is comprised of aeolian limestone platform reef overlain by loose coral shingle storm ridges with some coarse coral sand beaches. There are areas of cemented coral shingle and framestone. There are six tidal ponds on the island.

The island is largely free of vegetation over the extensive areas of bare coral ridges. Along the southern shoreline of the main part of the island are narrow stands of the mangrove *Avicennia marina*. The northern shoreline is also lined with mangroves to the west, as well as *Halosarcia halocnemoides* and *Nitraria billardierei* dwarf shrubland, with *Suaeda australis* succulents. Areas of bare coral have very occasional Coastal Groundsel

Senecio lautus and Austral Seablite *Sonchus oleraceus*. Areas with some sand or guano are usually interspersed with Wild Oats *Avena fatua*. Of the 19 plants recorded, five (26%) are exotic².

Up until 2013 there were seven buildings and a jetty associated with rock lobster fishers. The jetty and four derelict buildings and associated rubbish have since been removed. Three buildings remain, as well as surveyors' pickets from an airstrip proposed for the island in 1981.

Landing: A landing can be made onto the south-eastern end of the island near to the original jetty site. There are no deep water access points or safe anchoring sites on the island, and access is by small vessel only.

Ornithological History: Few visits by other ornithologists have been made as most visit the larger Pelsaert Island. CAS visited in late January 1989, April 1989, February 1991, April–May 1997, July 1998, April 1999, July 2003, October 2008, May 2009, April 2011, and December 2012, April and December 2013 and June, October and November 2014. In addition, we extensively mapped Newman Island seabird colonies over three years between 2006–2008. R. E. Johnstone visited in October 1981 and August 1983. Surveys were conducted by A. Burbidge and P. Fuller during their island-wide surveys during the summer of 1981, 1991, 1995, 1996 and 1999.

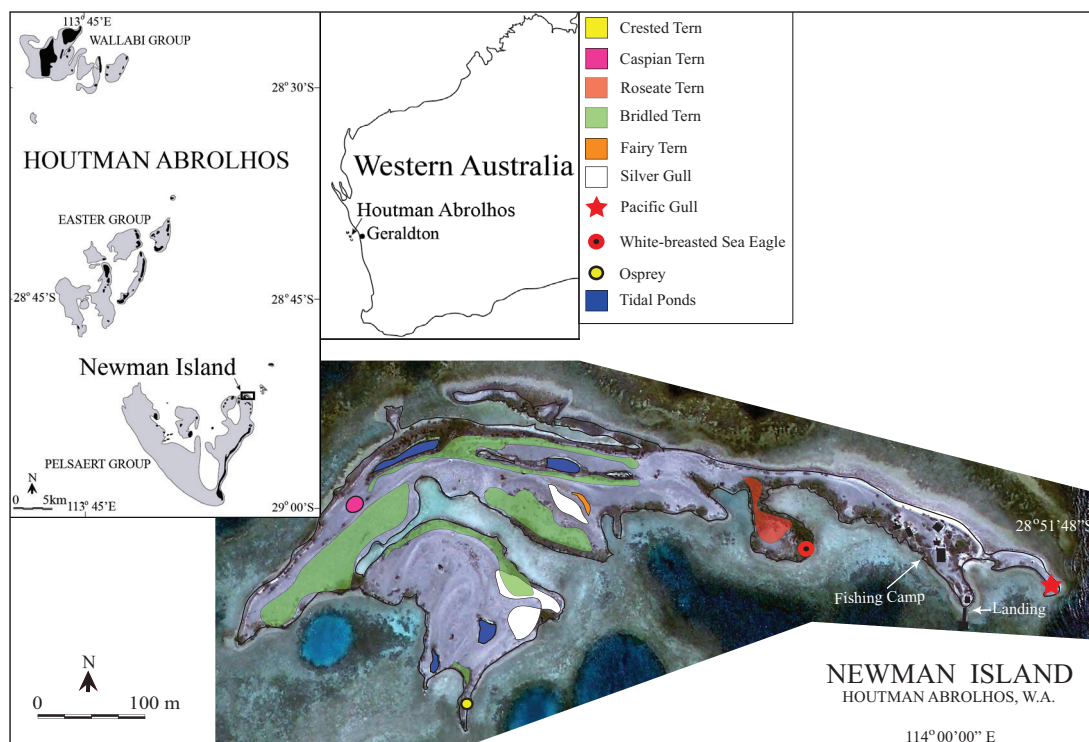


Figure 1. Newman Island, Houtman Abrolhos, Western Australia.

Breeding Seabirds and Status

Pandion cristatus Eastern Osprey – Two nests, one active most years.

Haliaeetus leucogaster White-bellied Sea-Eagle – One recently used nest adjacent to mangroves was empty in December 2006³, however an adult was incubating eggs in July 2014.

Larus pacificus Pacific Gull – One pair has nested on a coral ridge at the eastern end of island above the high water mark since our visits commenced in 1989. The nest was constructed of woven brown algae and some flotsam, principally *Ecklonia radiata* and *Sargassum distichum* as well as strands of nylon rope. Eggs were laid in August and young usually fledged by November or early December. By the time of our December 2006 visit, birds were caring for fledglings/juveniles.

Chroicocephalus novaehollandiae Silver Gull – Up to 79 nests have been recorded but breeding effort was highly variable. In April 1989 there were approximately 100 adults, with many nests containing eggs. In April 2011 only seven nests were active, and of 27 nests located in June 2014, five were active. More Silver Gulls nested here during autumn than in summer. Other seabird observers have recorded 15 nests in December 1993, none in December 1999⁴ and 12 in December 2006³.

Onychoprion anaethetus Bridled Tern – Up to 55 nests have been observed. This is one of the most unusual nesting sites for this species as there are two distinct nesting populations. Johnstone⁵ first observed autumn nesting of Bridled Terns here in 1981. Subsequent visits by CAS have confirmed this, with up to 130 adults overhead in late April, and on occasions 30 adults in June. Summer breeding birds had fledglings in late April at a time when the autumn-nesting population commenced laying. Adults in July 2003 had bare or refeathering brood patches, and there was one fledgling and a bird incubating an egg. On 24 April 1999, 22 nests with eggs and fresh chicks were located. At least four eggs examined were hatching. On 21 April 2011, we located at least six eggs, two nests with chicks less than three days old as well as two with fledglings. At a time when Bridled Terns on the other 89 islands that they nest on at the Houtman Abrolhos are migrating northwards to the Sula Sea⁶, those on Newman Island were fledging young. Summer breeding Bridled Terns fledged young by mid-late April and autumn nesting birds by mid-late July. Bridled Terns nested in a loose colony across all areas of the island favouring broken ground and along the fringes of stands of the mangrove *Avicennia marina*.

Sterna dougallii Roseate Tern – Up to 80 nests have been recorded in autumn. In late April 1997 there were 80 nests and 350 adults attending the colony, however the colony was abandoned by May 1997. In late April 2013 we recorded 42 birds on eggs and 50 others were prospecting for nest sites. This species nests along coral ridges usually where finer coral fragments facilitate nest scrapes.

Sternula nereis Fairy Tern – Small colonies (up to 20 pairs) of this species were observed in 1993 and 1999^{4,7}. CAS recorded 30 nests in February 1991; half of these contained 1–2 eggs and the other half young chicks. On 15 October 2014, six adults were defending sites, and one nest contained a single egg.

On Newman Island nesting always occurred on finer coral fragments in exposed areas. Nesting locations varied from one year to the next.

Thalasseus bergii Crested Tern – In late April 1989 CAS recorded 30 nests, all with fresh eggs. Elsewhere at the Houtman Abrolhos, Crested Terns commenced laying between October–December and were very synchronous. Autumn nesting in the Pelsaert Group has also been recorded on Stick Island where in late May 1997 a colony contained pulli aged from 5–25 days.

Hydroprogne caspia Caspian Tern – One pair. In October 2014 a nest contained two nestlings <5 days old.

Factors Affecting Status

The island is visited infrequently due the difficulty of landing and the collapse of the jetty. Present and past buildings and a jetty on the island are remnants that were used by rock lobster fishermen. Bridled Terns often nest amongst stacks of timber or corrugated iron associated with some fishing camps.

Australian Sea-lions *Neophoca cinerea* used some near shore areas amongst mangroves as haulouts.

Like other islands in the Houtman Abrolhos, there are several introduced weed species, including Wild Oats *Avena fatua*, the Medic Burr *Medicago polymorpha* and Wild Radish *Raphanus sativus*. Competition from weed species may impact native vegetation and nesting sites of some species.

Other Seabirds Recorded

Haematopus longirostris Australian Pied Oystercatcher – No nests were located but a pair of this species was observed.

Egretta sacra Eastern Reef Egret – A pair of birds was observed in mangroves adjacent to one of the tidal ponds. Quite possibly this species nests under cover there.

Other Vertebrates Recorded

Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>
Silvereye	<i>Zosterops lateralis</i>
Red-capped Plover	<i>Charadrius ruficapillus</i>
Greater Sand Plover	<i>Charadrius leschenaultii</i>
Red-necked Stint	<i>Calidris ruficollis</i>
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>
Grey-tailed Tattler	<i>Tringa brevipes</i>
Welcome Swallow	<i>Hirundo neoxena</i>

Banding

Onychoprion anaethetus – five adults in 1997, 13 adults in 2003.

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Erratum.

Seabird Islands: Gun Island, Pelsaert Group, Houtman Abrolhos, Western Australia

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Corella **39**: 102-104.

Page 103: **Other Vertebrate Recorded.** Yellow White-eye *Zosterops luteus* should read, Silvereye *Zosterops lateralis*.