

SEABIRD ISLANDS

No. 248

Booby Island, Kimberley Region, Western Australia

Location: 15°03'40"S, 124°19'34"E; about 22 kilometres NNE of Champagny Island and about 60 kilometres west of Cape Brewster in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. Booby Island was formerly known as White Island. The name was changed on 25 March 2004 by the Geographic Names Committee of the Western Australian Department of Land Information in order to avoid confusion with another island of the same name situated further to the north in Admiralty Gulf.

Status: Currently un-allocated Crown land. Negotiations are in progress between the Department of Conservation and Land Management and the Kimberley Land Council for a proposal to set aside Booby Island as a nature reserve.

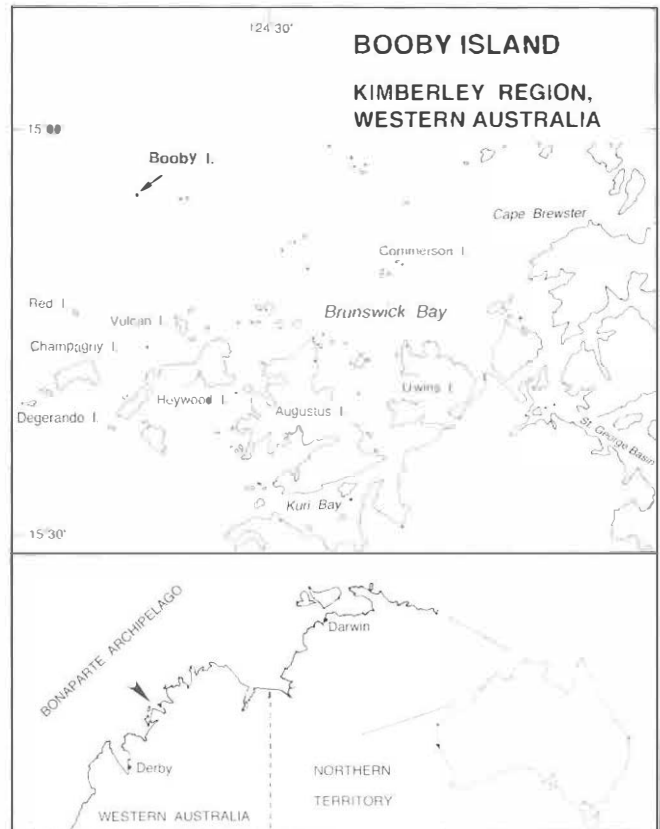
Description: A small rocky island of about four hectares, composed entirely of dark coloured basalt rising to a height of no more than 20 metres. There is no vegetation of any description apart from a green algae, *Enteromorpha clathrata* (identified by A. Millar, Royal Botanic Garden, Sydney) covering some of the basalt rock exposed at low tide. Almost the entire area down to the waterline is covered with a thick coating of white guano. The island was at one time mined extensively for guano, although no records can be found as to when or who was responsible. The first discovery of guano in the area is attributed to American whalers, and the first official record of guano export was in 1847³. Guano mining on Booby Island would most likely have occurred during the mid to latter part of the 19th century, when other islands in the Kimberley were mined, such as the Lacepede Islands and Browse Island⁷. On Booby Island, loose rocks have been stacked into piles in order to gain access to the guano. In some areas, where slabs of stone and rubble have been cleared, ideal nesting places have been created for seabirds.

A poorly charted reef adjacent to the western side of Booby Island extends past the northern and southern ends and is uncovered for a considerable distance from the island during low tides. A high degree of caution is advised when approaching.

A passing reference by Commander John Lort Stokes⁶ aboard H.M.S. *Beagle* on 19 April 1838 to 'a white islet in the distance' is thought to be the first reference to the island.

Landing: On a small beach at the northern end, or on a narrow beach on the east side that is present during calm weather and a low spring tide. Due to the slippery nature of the basalt rock, it is still necessary to walk to the northern end if landing on the east side. Any slight swell from the nearby reef can create a hazardous landing. Anchorage for a 20-metre boat can be found to the east of the island at about 15°04'327"S, 124°20'008"E.

Ornithological History: The first indication that this was a major seabird island was in 1952 when S. Fowler



communicated to D. L. Serventy that it was an important roosting place for the Brown Booby.

In October 1945 there were 4 000 to 5 000 roosting boobies on White Island (now Booby Island). D. L. Serventy passed by the island on 12 October 1949, but saw no birds at all over it⁵. Serventy also mentions that a Mr Bardwell visited the island, describing it as being of pure sand, bare of vegetation and with no sign of bird life, but this account was most likely confused with the White Island in Admiralty Gulf.

On 19 August 1986, A. Burbidge and P. Fuller visited the island between 0700 and 0800 hours¹. On 21 August 1998, a brief visit was made by T. Willing, but a landing was not possible due to unfavourable tidal conditions (pers. comm.). On 22 May 2002, K. Coate and B. Moyle visited the island between 0630 and 0830 hours, making a hazardous landing at the northern end. On 19 May 2003, K. Coate with other naturalists, visited the island between 0630 and 0730 hours, landing on a low tide in calm conditions on the eastern side. On 27 June 2003, K. Coate again visited the island, but because of adverse conditions was unable to land. The nearest major breeding colony of Brown Booby to Booby Island is Adele Island —

140 kilometres WSW². Browse Island to the north of Adele Island was a former major breeding ground, but it was abandoned after disturbance from guano diggers in the 19th century.

Breeding Seabirds and Status

Sula leucogaster Brown Booby — On 19 August 1986, Burbidge and Fuller found breeding had taken place and nesting finished. Several thousand Brown Boobies were present with about 20–25 per cent in juvenile plumage and unable to fly. They estimated that there were between 2 000 and 2 500 birds in juvenile plumage and that the island carried about 2 000 breeding pairs. On 21 August 1998, Willing estimated 400, mostly immature with a ratio of 5 to every adult.

On 22 May 2002, Coate and Moyle found birds were spread over the entire island, with an estimated 1 500 upward to 2 000 breeding. Nests were mostly shallow scrapes in guano with some containing either feathers, coral or sparse amounts of seaweed. Breeding was at all stages, with a small number (40–50) on the summit sitting on eggs. Clustered on rocks above the water were many fully-fledged juveniles as yet unable to fly. Many juveniles were flying in the vicinity of the island. 20–30 dead young at all stages of development were scattered through the breeding colony. On 19 May 2003, Coate *et al.* estimated there was a similar amount of birds to the previous year, and that breeding was at all stages — from eggs to fledged young. On 27 June 2003 there was noticeably fewer nesting birds on the island, but many more juveniles flying or clustered on the rocks still unable to fly. Booby chicks still in down, were on the summit. Scattered throughout the breeding area were many dried fish with chewed heads. (These were identified by B. Hutchins, Curator of Fish at the Western Australian Museum as Finny Scad *Megalaspis cordyla*, a member of the trevally family).

Sterna bergii Crested Tern — Breeding on Booby Island has not been reported previously. On 22 May 2002, there were an estimated 500 birds sitting either on eggs or with newly hatched chicks about 50 metres south from the landing point on the north end on an area of ground cleared by guano diggers. The nests were hardly noticeable scrapes on accumulated guano. Concentrated amongst the rocks near the waterline at the northern end were an estimated 400 runners, including small fluffy chicks to almost fully-fledged juveniles as yet unable to fly. In addition there were many juveniles flying. On 19 May 2003, there were about 400 birds sitting on eggs and newly hatched chicks at the same location as the previous year. About 100 metres to the north-west, was a further colony with about 200 birds sitting on eggs. In this vicinity and down to the water's edge were an estimated 400–500 small to medium size runners. Resting on the exposed reef adjacent to the island were three large concentrations of Crested Tern, estimated at a thousand in number, of which about a third were in juvenile plumage. On 27 June 2003, large numbers of birds could be seen from the dinghy with many immature birds sitting on the northern end of the island. Some medium size runners were visible, but there did not appear to be birds sitting on eggs.

Factors Affecting Status

Due to the remoteness and difficulty in landing on Booby Island, there would be very little human interference to the breeding colonies. Predation from Silver Gulls⁴, Reef Egrets and possibly White-bellied Sea-eagles, which are reasonably common in the area, are the most likely factors to affect the colony. On 22 May 2002, 46 Silver Gulls were resting on shoreline rocks and 15 on 19 May 2003. Unlike Silver Gulls at other major breeding islands in the Kimberley (Adele Island and the Lacepede Islands), these birds showed a total lack of interest in our presence, and on both visits did not interfere with the nesting colony of Brown Booby or Crested Tern. This may have been due to them being full of food and the early hour of the day. No reptiles were evident.

Other Seabirds Recorded

<i>Egretta sacra</i>	Eastern Reef Egret — resident: thirteen 21 August 1998; six 22 May 2002; three 19 May 2003.
<i>Phalacrocorax varius</i>	Pied Cormorant — five 21 August 1998.
<i>Larus novaehollandiae</i>	Silver Gull — fifty 21 August 1998; forty-six 22 May 2002; fifteen 19 May 2003; fifteen 27 June 2003.
<i>Sterna albifrons</i>	Little Tern — two 21 August 1998.
<i>Sterna bengalensis</i>	Lesser Crested Tern — sixty 21 August 1998.

Banding

Nil

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Acknowledgments

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