

SEABIRD ISLANDS

No. 238

Higginson Islet, North-east Arnhemland, Northern Territory

Location: 12°02'S, 136°52'E; 20 kilometres north-east of Nhulunbuy in the north-east corner of the Top End of the Northern Territory.

Status: Aboriginal Land.

Other Names: Ilipa (Yolgnu Aboriginal name).

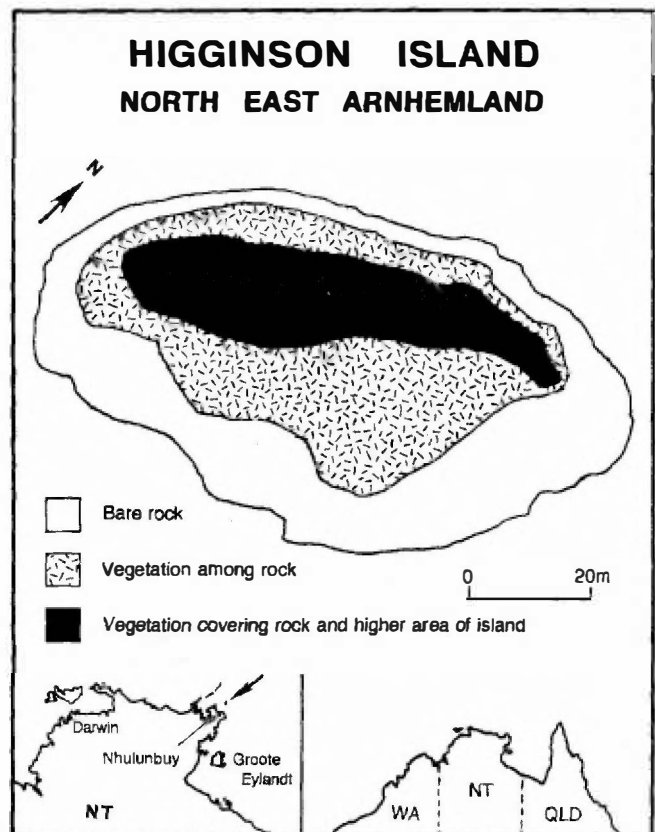
Description: Total size is about 100 m × 60 m but with a 10 m high raised plateau section approximately 80 m by 20 m within this area. The drop down from this plateau is a gradual slope on the southern side, large boulders at the eastern and western ends, and more a sheer cliff drop on the northern side of the island. The island is all rock with small areas of coral shingle but no sand. There are no trees or shrubs present but low vegetation covers in excess of 75 per cent of the island. The upper section of the island is covered mostly by a low creeping vine (probably *Canavalia rosea*, with a little *Ipomea pes-capri*) with smaller sections of a grass growing to about 30 cm (probably *Lepurus repens*). A few larger boulders protrude above the vegetation. The vines are present at varying densities over most of the island, except close to the water. The coverage and condition of the vegetation varies during the year, being a lot denser and lush during the wet season. Two smaller and lower rocky outcrops exist about 100 m off the north-east end of the main island.

Landing: Very difficult from a boat, access for surveys is achieved by helicopter.

Ornithological History: No previous documentation has been located. R. Chatto surveyed the island from air or ground about 12 times (albeit some were very quick fly overs) between November 1993 and October 1997.

Breeding Seabirds and Status

Sterna bergii Crested Tern — Large regular rookery present during dry season (April to August) on each of four consecutive years checked. Breeding occurs at the western end of the island on the plateau and abutting slope running down from the top. Most of the nesting is on the sloping sides themselves. The rest of the island has more a sheer drop down from the top and thus the plateau is not popular for nesting. Nests are in vegetation on or among the rocks, or on shale sections. The number of nests was estimated as minimum each year to range between 2 500 and 5 000 over the four years.



• Higginson Islet (looking east-north-east).

Photo: R. Chatto

Sterna dougalli Roseate Tern — Irregular breeding occurs in sometimes significant numbers. Most nests are on the eastern end of the island, in a tight rookery on trampled grass. Most are on the top of the island but some extend down the sides among rocks where vegetation is present and on shingle beds. Small numbers (<20) were breeding November 1993; 1 500+ nests were estimated May 1994; while 3 000+ adults were present and definitely nesting in September 1994 but no estimate of the number of nests was made. (They nested at the opposite end of the island to the May nesting and near where the Crested Tern had not long finished). Nesting activity was unable to be confirmed in 1995 but it was confirmed that there was no nesting in May 1996.

Sterna sumatrana Black-naped Tern — Defending adults and fledged young present in November 1993. Nests were not specifically confirmed but from numbers of adults present it appears likely that small numbers (<50) breed in association with large Roseate Tern colonies.

Sterna anaethetus Bridled Tern — Large numbers present and nests verified but difficult to estimate nest numbers because of the concealment of the nests, both deep among rocks all over the island or hidden under dense ground vegetation on the top plateau section of the island. If it can be assumed all birds emerging from the rocks or grass are associated with a nest then the island would have low thousands of nests at least when estimates of flying adults are in excess of 10 000 such as in May 1994. From the state of breeding seen on a number of visits during the years, it appears breeding occurs through from March to November, but the season appears to be continuous rather than occurring in two separate seasons, as is that of Roseate Terns. Main part of breeding appears to be April to June.

Anous stolidus Common Noddy — Small numbers (100+ nests, with eggs) recorded in May 1994 and 1996 of the only two dry season checks. Eggs layed on bare rock around the side slopes of the island, mostly at the eastern and western ends. Numbers in excess of 500 recorded in September 1994 but no nesting occurring at that time. Extensive surveys of the Northern Territory coast by R. Chatto show this to be the only Common Noddy breeding in the 150+ seabird colony sites located to date.



• Higginson Islet, (looking south-west).

Photo: R. Chatto

Factors Affecting Status

No mammals are present on the island and the only reptiles observed to date are small skinks; hence terrestrial predation appears unlikely. There is evidence of young terns, mostly Crested, being taken by the pair of White-bellied Sea-Eagles *Haliaeetus leucogaster* which appear to breed regularly on the island. Two eggs were seen in May of 1994 and 1996, the only two years checked on the ground. They breed on top of the island, on the ground, with no nest or lining, and within a few metres of breeding Crested, Bridled and Roseate Terns, which are preyed on by the adult eagles. Nesting sites are sufficiently elevated to avoid loss in all but the most extreme of storms. Strong winds may cause problems to more exposed nests, for example on bare rock. However, as most nesting occurs during the dry season such factors are unlikely to cause significant losses.

With landings by boat near impossible and with other more scenic and accessible islands closer to the mainland, it is unlikely that disturbance from visiting fishermen or yachtsmen affects breeding.

The major form of predation is probably traditional harvest of eggs (mostly Crested Tern, because of their larger numbers and size, and ease to harvest). This is not seen as a major threat at the moment. Although frequency of traditional egg harvest may have had the potential to increase with the arrival of motorised boats to replace traditional canoes, the arrival of shop food and royalties with the mining company at Nhulunbuy (Gove) may have reduced the incentive and need to collect eggs from remote islands.

Other Seabirds Recorded

<i>Sula leucogaster</i>	Brown Booby
<i>Phalacrocorax sulcirostris</i>	Little Black Cormorant
<i>Ardea sacra</i>	Eastern Reef Egret
<i>Larus novaehollandiae</i>	Silver Gull
<i>Anous minutus</i>	White-capped Noddy*

*500+ on one occasion, November 1993. (Only a few Common Noddy present on this occasion).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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