

SEABIRD ISLANDS

No. 244

Low Rock, South-west Gulf of Carpentaria, Northern Territory

Location: 14°38'S, 135°47'E; 75 kilometres south-west of Groote Eylandt in the south-west part of the Gulf of Carpentaria in the Top End of the Northern Territory.

Status: Aboriginal land.

Other names: None known.

Description: A small and low mangrove centred island that is about 120 m × 30 m with the long axis running essentially north-south. The central mangrove area, which consists mainly of *Pemphis acidula* and *Avicennia marina*, comprises about 25 per cent of the island and is surrounded by sand and coral shingle, which is in turn surrounded by small rocks, some of which go under at high tide. Growing among some of the rocks is the succulent prostrate, *Sesuvium portulacastrum*. The island is relatively isolated, being 25 kilometres from the mainland or nearest island.

Landing: Landing by boat is possible although the surrounding water is fairly shallow. Survey access was by helicopter.

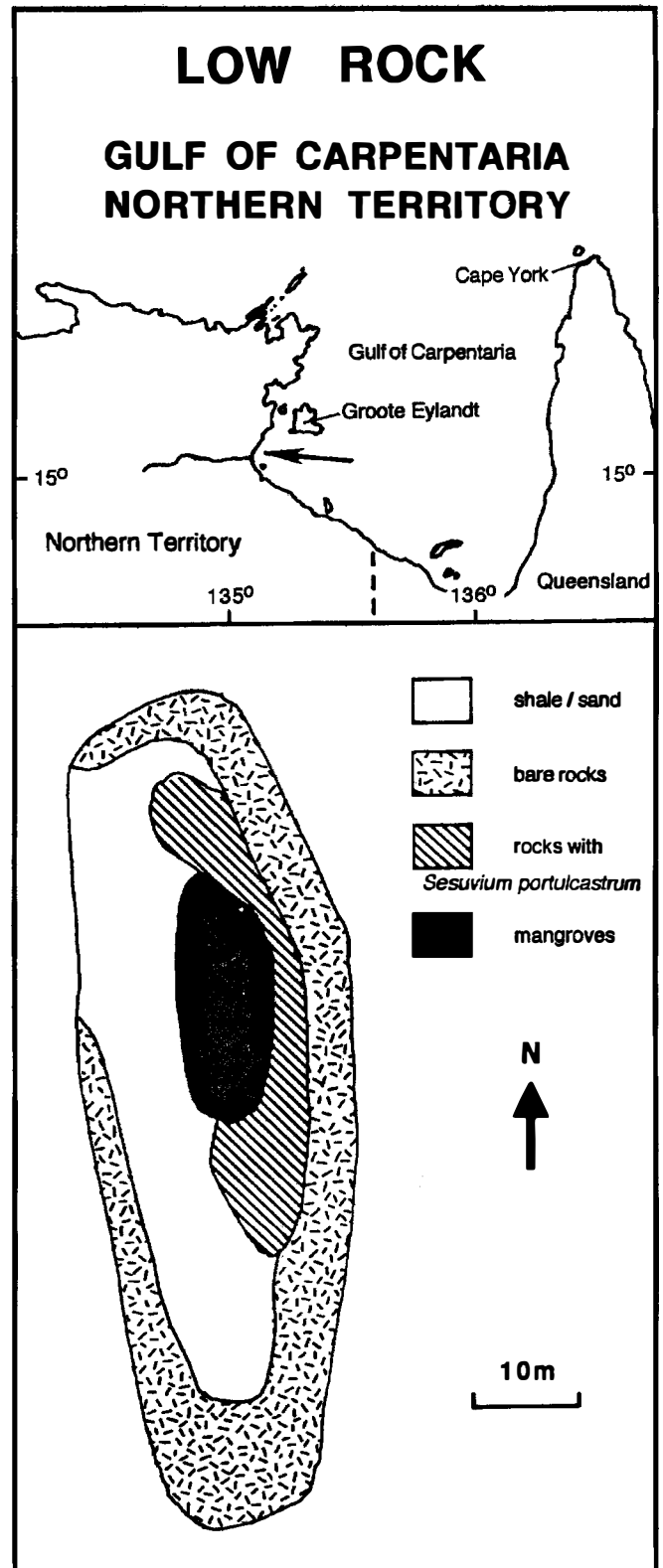
Ornithological History: Storr (1977) reported Crested Terns breeding on the island between April and November¹. R. Chatto surveyed the island from air or ground eight times (however, six of these consisted only of very quick fixed wing fly overs) between September 1993 and October 1996. The 1994 season was the only season where ground surveys were done.

Breeding Seabirds and Status

Phalacrocorax varius Pied Cormorant — Confirmed nesting in early May 1994; however, the site looked to have been used in prior seasons. There were 50–60 nests between 3 and 5 metres off the ground in the *Pemphis acidula* trees. They contained 2–4 eggs. About 150 adults were present at this time.

Sterna bengalensis Lesser Crested Tern — This is the only confirmed breeding site for this species in over 150 Northern Territory seabird breeding sites located by R. Chatto in the past nine years. Breeding was on two sections of the island, both close to the sites used by the Pied Cormorants earlier in the season. In the only ground survey done, late September (1994), one section had approximately 200 scrapes comprising around 70 per cent single eggs and 30 per cent small single chicks, while the other section had commenced a little earlier and had about 50 runners. All chicks were a variety of colours from grey to brown to white. All 'nests' were in scrapes on sand or shingle or among small rocks.

Sterna bergii Crested Tern — Reported breeding on Low Rock by Storr¹ but no other details are given. Medium-sized colony (by Northern Territory standards); confirmed active



in the dry of 1994 and is probably a regular dry season breeding site. A minimum estimate of 5 000 birds were nesting in early May 1994. Birds were all on eggs at this stage which is consistent with all Crested Tern colonies (i.e. an April to August season) in the Northern Territory (Chatto, pers. obs.). Breeding occurs at two sites at the north and south ends of the central mangrove section of the island. Nests were mainly shallow scrapes on open sand or shale, but some were among small rocks and *Sesuvium portulacastrum*. Approximately 2 per cent of the 'nests' were double eggs, the rest all being singles.

Sterna dougallii Roseate Tern — Confirmed breeding in September 1994 only, however, the island is likely to be used regularly by this species. A minimum of 2 000 nests was present in late September, with about 50 per cent containing one egg and 50 per cent with two eggs. There was also the occasional newly hatched chick. Nests were mainly between rocks and among *Sesuvium portulacastrum*, however, a small number was on bare sand. Some individuals of this species went to a little more effort to construct some sort of nest than any of the other breeding terns on the island. In addition to the birds in the breeding colony area, there were another 6 000+ Roseate Terns present on the island, most in non-breeding plumage and roosting on the rocks adjacent to the colony. The vast majority of the colony was at the one site in the northern part of the island; however, there was a small number associated with the Black-naped Tern site (see below) on the southern part of the island.

Sterna sumatrana Black-naped Tern — Breeding was confirmed in late September 1994. This site is likely to be used regularly by this species. A minimum of 300 nests was seen on the northern part of the island and 200 on the southern part. About 80 per cent of all nests consisted of two eggs while the remainder had one egg. One newly hatched chick was also seen. There were also 'low hundreds' of this species roosting on the adjacent rocks with Roseate Terns.

Sterna anaethetus Bridled Tern — In excess of 1 000 birds were present in the late September 1994 survey. As nests were well concealed deep among rocks and time did not permit lengthy searching it is not known whether all birds were involved with a nest; however, the few nests found all contained a single egg. It is possible that this was just the beginning of the season for this species, although Chatto has observed this species to be less seasonally consistent than other terns nesting in the Northern Territory. This species often has a lengthy breeding season with not all birds breeding simultaneously.

Factors Affecting Status

No mammals are present on the island and the only reptiles observed were small skinks, hence terrestrial predation appears unlikely. Nesting sites are not well elevated above the surrounding sea and may be subject to loss in strong winds or stormy seas.

Although landing by boat is not too difficult, the island's isolation and small size are unlikely to attract much



• Low Rock from the air (looking south-east).

Photo: R. Chatto

disturbance from visiting fishermen or yachtsmen; however, traditional harvesting of eggs may have some effect.

Three Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* nests were present in *Pemphis acidula* trees on the island. Although one bird was standing on a nest in May 1994, the nests were not observed to be active in any of the surveys. Three birds observed from the air in July 1996 could have been two adults and a young from that season. White-bellied Sea-Eagles *Haliaeetus leucogaster* were also seen visiting the island. Chatto has observed this species preying on young terns on other Northern Territory islands, but no confirmation of such was seen on this island.

Other Seabirds Recorded

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|-------------------------------|---------------------|
| <i>Sula leucogaster</i> | Brown Booby |
| <i>Egretta sacra</i> | Eastern Reef Egret |
| <i>Haematopus fuliginosus</i> | Sooty Oystercatcher |
| <i>Larus novaehollandiae</i> | Silver Gull |

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REFERENCES

1. Storr (1977). *Birds of the Northern Territory*. Western Australian Museum Special Publication No. 7.

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SEABIRD ISLAND SERIES

We are always seeking more information on the status of seabirds on the islands around Australia. Many of the islands which have been described in the series have been small. This in no way belittles their importance, as often they are the only 'breeding platform' available to enable the birds to exploit ephemeral food, a feature of the tropics. The latest island described, Low Rock, is an excellent example. We are seeking more such descriptions.

Readers are invited to participate in the series. Those interested should consult the Editor of the Series and obtain guidelines for descriptions, the information required for preparation of maps, and the type of photographs preferred. As with many articles that are published in *Corella*, we offer much assistance to help authors with their articles as we feel strongly that their knowledge of local areas should

become available, and thus contribute to our understanding of what is necessary for the welfare of these birds. The descriptions of the status of seabirds on islands in this series achieve this objective as they are used extensively by those concerned with policies on conservation.

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