

## SEABIRD ISLANDS

No. 207

## Piper Islands, Great Barrier Reef, Queensland

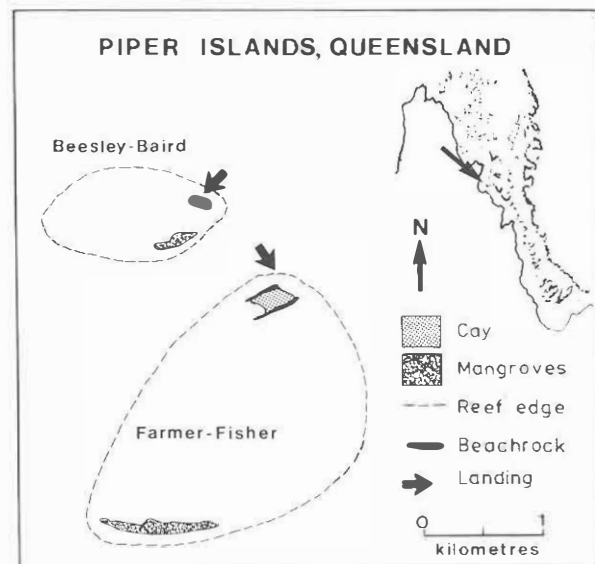
(comprising Farmer-Fisher and Beesley-Baird Islands)

**Location:** 12°14'S, 142°12'E (Beesley-Baird); 12°15'S, 143°14'E (Farmer-Fisher); 35 kilometres south from Cape Grenville, Queensland.

**Status:** Farmer-Fisher: Queensland National Park. Beesley-Baird: Queensland National Park.

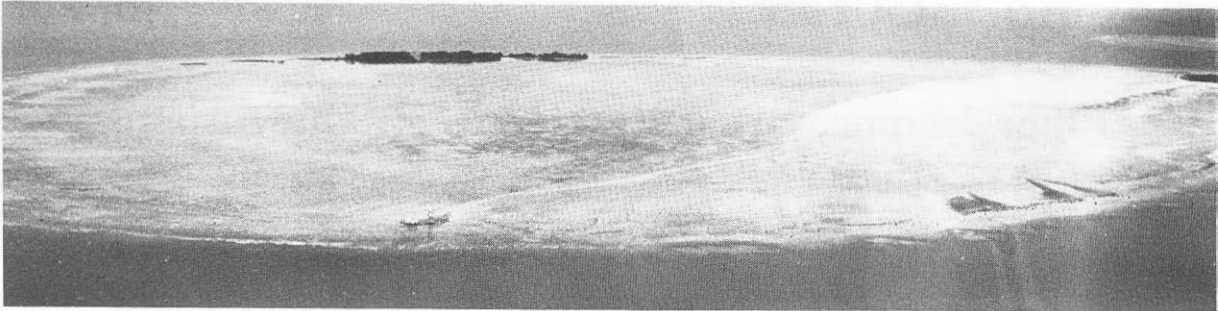
**Description:** Farmer-Fisher and Beesley-Baird Islands are a pair of low wooded islands of the inner northern Great Barrier Reef. A low wooded island is a complex island, consisting of a coral reef with seaward shingle ramparts, a leeward sand cay and a mangrove forest between. In the Piper Islands, the cays and mangrove forests have been named separately, i.e. Farmer (cay) — Fisher (mangroves) and Beesley (cay) — Baird (mangroves). FARMER: 7 ha; 350 m × 200 m; height 2.0 m. A cay of coral sand vegetated with an outer grass/shrub community and an inner low woodland. The grass/shrub community is more extensive on the eastern side and contains grasses *Lepturus repens* and *Spinifex hirsuta*, herbs *Sesuvium portulacastrum* and *Boerhavia repens*, and other plants *Ipomea pes-caprae*, *Tribulus cistoides*, *Salsola kali*, *Abrus precatorius*, *Canavalia rosea* and *Crotalaria* sp. The woodland contains mostly *Pisonia grandis* up to 4 m high. FISHER: 3.0 ha; 700 m × 50 m; height 1.0 m. A series of cemented coral ramparts and coral shingle ridges with the herb *Sesuvium portulacastrum* and shrubs *Pemphis acidula*, and adjacent mangroves mainly *Rhizophora stylosa* and *Avicennia marina* to five metres high. BEESLEY: 2.4 ha; 300 m × 80 m; height 2.0 m. A small cay of coral sand, vegetated with a sparse community of *Lepturus repens* and *Sesuvium portulacastrum*. BAIRD: 1.0 ha; 200 m × 50 m; height 1.0 m. Coral ramparts and shingle banks, with adjacent mangroves *Rhizophora stylosa* and *Avicennia marina* to five metres high.

**Landing:** By dinghy, from a vessel anchored at the north-western end of Farmer-Fisher Reef,



near Farmer Island. Local knowledge is necessary for navigation in this area.

**Ornithological History:** J. Warham<sup>2</sup> landed on Farmer Island for two hours on 6 November, 1958, and recorded Eastern Reef Egrets and Pied Oystercatchers breeding. In October 1973 D. Stoddart<sup>1</sup> mapped both groups and recorded vegetation and seabirds. Queensland National Parks and Wildlife Service officers have made several recent visits. B. R. King landed on Farmer for three hours on 24 April 1983, to map the cay and record vegetation and seabirds; A. Taplin (for B. King) visited all islands briefly on 26 December 1984, to record vegetation and seabirds. C. J. Limpus visited Farmer for two hours on 29 November 1987, to record seabirds and turtles. T. A. Walker recorded seabirds on Farmer for one hour on 12 May 1988, and F. Muir and J. Cornelius recorded seabirds on Fisher and Farmer on 10 July 1988.



- Farmer (lower right) — Fisher (left rear) Islands from the air (looking approximately south-west).

Photo: Queensland National Parks and Wildlife Service

### Breeding Seabirds and Status

*Egretta sacra* Eastern Reef Egret — Breeding on Farmer in November 1958. Old nests were present there on all recent visits but no breeding activity was recorded. Nests are in *Pisonia* trees.

*Larus novaehollandiae* Silver Gull — Breeding on Farmer in April 1983 (two empty nests and one with two eggs), and in May 1988 (70 adults present, 13 nests with 1–3 eggs each). Nests were widely spaced on the ground, concealed under or among strand vegetation.

*Hydroprogne caspia* Caspian Tern — Breeding on Farmer in 1988, in May (one nest with two eggs) and July (two nests with eggs). Nests are scrapes in the sand with material around the cup, and are sited in the strand vegetation.

*Anous minutus* Black Noddy — Breeding activity in the mangroves of Baird in December 1984 with 1 000+ birds courting. All of the islands have large roosting populations all year, numbering thousands of birds (not counted). The status of the breeding population needs further investigation.

### Factors Affecting Status

Human disturbance is greatest on Farmer which is visited occasionally by fishing vessels and navigation light maintenance crews. Illegal shooting of Torresian Imperial-Pigeons *Ducula spilorrhoa* which breed in thousands in the mangrove areas also causes occasional disturbance in summer. Hawksbill Turtles *Eretmochelys imbricata* nest on top of the two cays in small numbers and may cause some disturbance to

ground-nesting seabirds. The size and distribution of the roosting and breeding Black Noddy population requires further assessment.

### Other Seabirds Recorded

<i>Pelecanus conspicillatus</i>	Australian Pelican <sup>2</sup>
<i>Phalacrocorax varius</i>	Pied Cormorant
<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>	Gull-billed Tern <sup>2</sup>
<i>Sterna dougallii</i>	Roseate Tern
<i>Sterna anaethetus</i>	Bridled Tern
<i>Sterna bergii</i>	Crested Tern
<i>Sterna bengalensis</i>	Lesser Crested Tern

### Banding

Nil.

### Bibliography

1. Stoddart, D. R. (1978). The Great Barrier Reef and the Great Barrier Reef Expedition, 1973. *Phil. Trans. R. Soc. Lond.* A291: 5–22.
2. Warham, J. (1962). Bird islands within the Great Barrier Reef and Torres Strait. *Emu* 62: 99–111.

### Acknowledgments

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