

SEABIRD ISLANDS

No. 210

Fife Island, Great Barrier Reef, Queensland

Location: 13°39'S, 143°44'E; 100 kilometres north-west from Cape Melville, Queensland.

Status: Commonwealth Lighthouse Reserve.

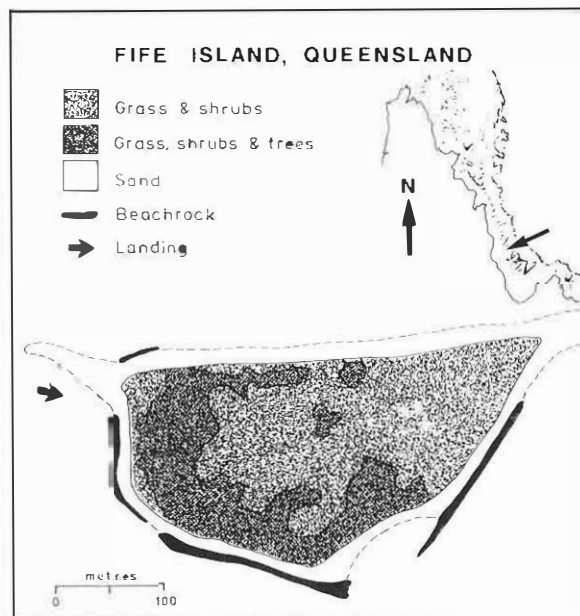
Other Names: Fyfe Island; Claremont No. 5; Espiegle Island.

Description: 4 ha; 400 m × 200 m; height 2.5 m above high water level. A low, vegetated sand cay on the western end of Fife Reef, one of the inner reefs of the northern Great Barrier Reef. The cay has a short sandspit at the north-western tip and a long intertidal sandspit stretching out over the reef flat to the north-east. It is composed of coral sand with lines of intertidal beachrock along the southern faces. An unmanned navigation light stands at the north-western end of the cay.

The cay is covered with a community of grasses, herbs and shrubs, with trees on the western quarter up to 7 metres high, including four introduced Coconut Palms *Cocos nucifera*. Ground cover includes herbs *Portulaca australis*, the vines *Ipomea pes-caprae* and *Tribulus cistoides*, grass *Lepturus repens*, and shrubs *Scaevola sericea*, *Euphorbia atoto*, *Thuarea involuta*, *Canavalia rosea*, and *Josephina imperatricus*. There is a thicket with *Premna corymbosa*, and other unidentified species, plus shrubs *Abutilon indicum* and *Colubrina asiatica*, and a single tree *Scheffleria actinophylla*. A total of 37 plant species have been recorded on the cay¹.

Landing: By dinghy, from a vessel anchored at the north-western edge of the reef, in the lee of the cay. Local knowledge is necessary when navigating in this area.

Ornithological History: J. Macgillivray² visited the cay on 31 August, 1848, but left no seabird records. G. F. Mathew⁴ recorded birds on 12–13 April, 1885. W. MacGillivray³ landed in 1910 but recorded no seabirds. J. A. Steers⁵ mapped the



cay and collected vegetation in June 1936, while D. R. Stoddart^{6,7} mapped the cay and recorded vegetation and birds in October 1973. Recent visitors include: B. R. King for three hours on 10 November, 1982 (vegetation, seabirds); M. Chaloupka and M. Godwin¹ (vegetation) and C. J. Limpus (seabirds, turtles) for one hour on 11 June 1984; A. Taplin for one hour on 21 July 1985 (vegetation, seabirds); J. Cornelius for one hour on 8 April 1986; F. Muir and J. Cornelius for one hour on 22 November 1987 (seabirds); C. J. Limpus for one hour on 7 December 1987 (vegetation, seabirds, turtles); T. Walker for three hours each on 11 May and 20 October 1988 (seabirds); J. Hicks and A. Symonds for two hours on 5 December 1988.



• *Fife Island from the air (looking north-west).*

Photo: B. R. King

Breeding Seabirds and Status

Puffinus pacificus Wedge-tailed Shearwater — Breeding occurs in summer in a small colony of less than 100 pairs. A few burrows are occupied during mid-year. In November 1982 the colony was devastated by a bushfire that burnt out the entire island; 32 burrows out of about 100 were still occupied after the fire, and eight incinerated carcasses were visible on the ground or in burrow entrances. The colony survived, with fewer than 10 burrows in use in June 1984, at least one in use in July 1985 (not examined fully), about 90 pairs in residence in December 1987 and at least 40 burrows recorded in 1988 (T. Walker). The colony is in an area of shrubs and grass on the central northern portion of the cay. It is one of only four colonies north of the Capricorn-Bunker islands.

Egretta sacra Eastern Reef Egret — Recorded as the dominant bird in 1885, with plenty of old nests present⁴. Up to 100 individuals have been recorded in recent years, with white morphs constituting from 85% to 91% of numbers present. Breeding in December 1987, with 15 nests in trees and tall shrubs (12 empty nests, one with one egg and two with two eggs) and 33 adults present (30 white, 3 grey). In May 1988 there were 7 pairs breeding (eggs and feathered chicks), with 21 empty nests.

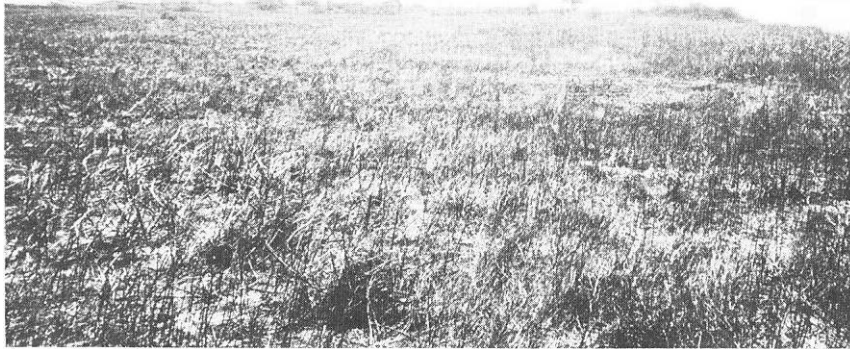
Haematopus longirostris Pied Oystercatcher — Present on all recent visits with a maximum of 15 in October 1988. One dead juvenile was found in October 1988.

Larus novaehollandiae Silver Gull — Present on most visits; none recorded in May 1988. Possibly breeding in July 1985, when a flock of about 70 adults and six juveniles was recorded.

Hydroprogne caspia Caspian Tern — Breeding in mid-year as isolated pairs. Two nests, each with two eggs, were recorded in June 1984, six adults and one pair with a fledgling in 1985, and one nest with two eggs in May 1988. Nests are shallow depressions in the sand, in the pumice line above high water level or in the grass.

Sterna anaethetus Bridled Tern — None was breeding in November 1982 after the fire. Breeding as solitary pairs in November and December of 1987 with 140–200 adults estimated and 10 nests located, each with one egg. About 40 birds were selecting nest sites in October 1988. Nests are difficult to locate, being scrapes in the sand concealed under vegetation.

Sterna bergii Crested Tern — Breeding in mid-year, present on other visits. In June 1984 there was a flock of 200 adults and fledglings, and the site of a recently vacated colony was located. In July 1985 about 90 adults were courting and selecting nest sites. In April 1986 there were 450 pairs, all with eggs. In May 1988 there was a colony of 25 nests with 350 adults in attendance, suggesting that further nesting was commencing. In October 1988 the same area contained 26 adults, also Lesser Crested Terns *S. bengalensis*, but no nests.



• *Vegetation on the grass-flat (looking west).*

Photo: T. A. Walker

Factors Affecting Status

The Wedge-tailed Shearwater colony, though small, is one of only four recorded north of the Capricorn-Bunker cays (the others being Raine, Rocky and Combe Islands). Fires such as the one in November 1982 and another recorded by MacGillivray³ in 1910 are a threat to all nesting birds. The cay is visited by fishing vessels and navigation light maintenance crews, with consequent human disturbance. Hawksbill Turtles *Eretmochelys imbricata* nest in small numbers, mainly in summer, and may occasionally disturb nesting seabirds. The cay has a large roosting population of Black Noddys *Anous minutus*, numbering in excess of 2 000.

Other Seabirds Recorded

<i>Pelecanus conspicillatus</i>	Australian Pelican
<i>Phalacrocorax varius</i>	Pied Cormorant
<i>Phalacrocorax melanoleucus</i>	Little Pied Cormorant
<i>Haematopus fuliginosus</i>	Sooty Oystercatcher
<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>	Gull-billed Tern
<i>Sterna dongalli</i>	Roseate Tern
<i>Sterna sumatrana</i>	Black-naped Tern
<i>Sterna albifrons</i>	Little Tern
<i>Sterna bengalensis</i>	Lesser Crested Tern
<i>Anous stolidus</i>	Common Noddy
<i>Anous minutus</i>	Black Noddy

Banding

Nil.

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Acknowledgments

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