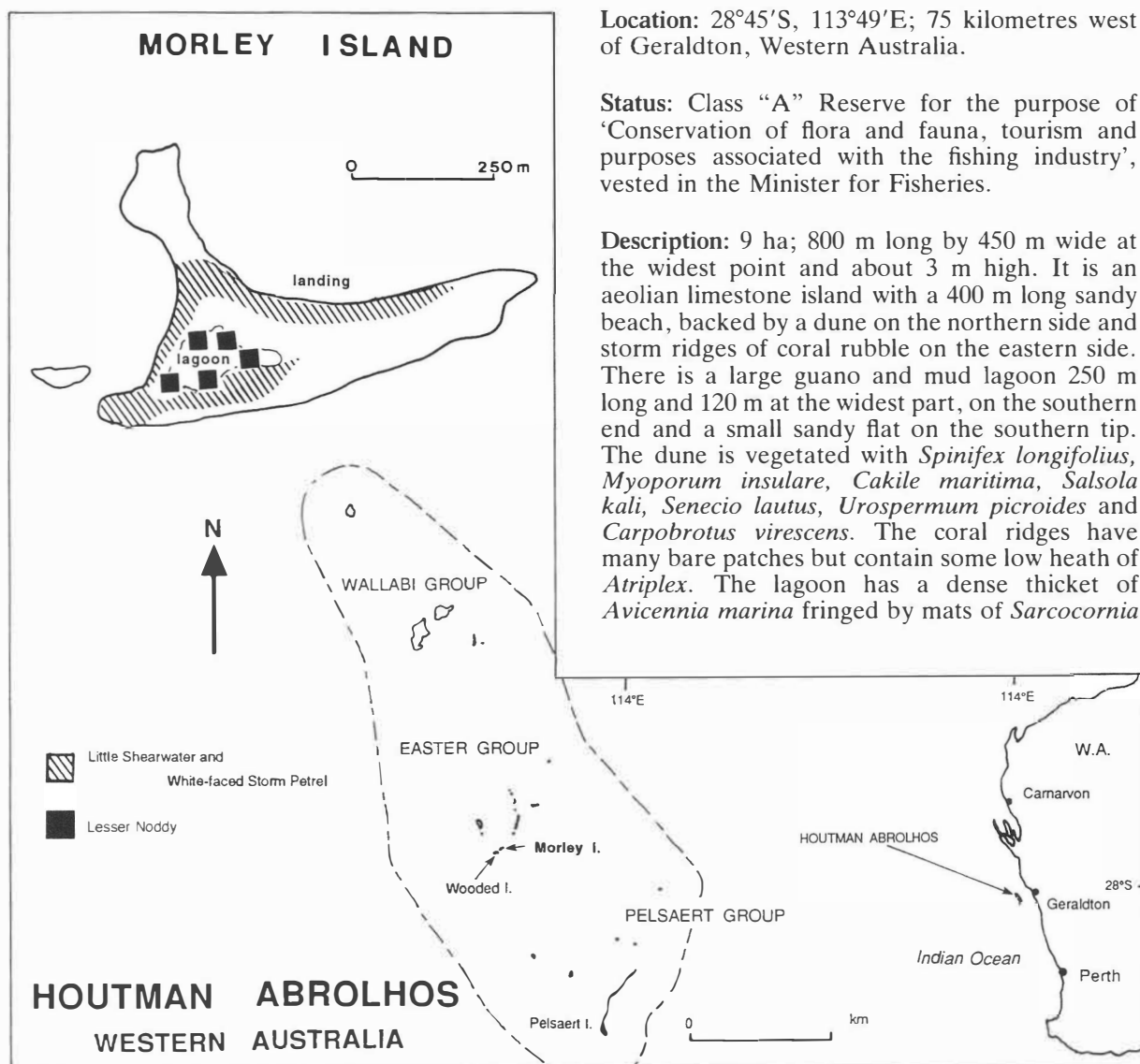


SEABIRD ISLANDS

No. 217

Morley Island, Easter Group, Houtman Abrolhos, Western Australia



Location: 28°45'S, 113°49'E; 75 kilometres west of Geraldton, Western Australia.

Status: Class "A" Reserve for the purpose of 'Conservation of flora and fauna, tourism and purposes associated with the fishing industry', vested in the Minister for Fisheries.

Description: 9 ha; 800 m long by 450 m wide at the widest point and about 3 m high. It is an aeolian limestone island with a 400 m long sandy beach, backed by a dune on the northern side and storm ridges of coral rubble on the eastern side. There is a large guano and mud lagoon 250 m long and 120 m at the widest part, on the southern end and a small sandy flat on the southern tip. The dune is vegetated with *Spinifex longifolius*, *Myoporum insulare*, *Cakile maritima*, *Salsola kali*, *Senecio lautus*, *Urospermum picroides* and *Carpobrotus virescens*. The coral ridges have many bare patches but contain some low heath of *Atriplex*. The lagoon has a dense thicket of *Avicennia marina* fringed by mats of *Sarcocornia*

blackiana and clumps of *Halosarcia halocnemoides* to 1 m. Other plants include *Nitraria billardierei*, *Bromus arenarius*, *Ehrharta longiflora*, *Threlkeldia diffusa*, *Lepidium puberulum*, *Crassula colorata*, *Nicotiana rotundifolia*, *Hymenobolus procumbens* and *Sonchus oleraceus*.

Landing: On to a sandy beach on the northern side.

Ornithological History: The early ornithological history of the island is rather vague. O. Lipfert probably visited the island in November 1894 as he collected eggs of the White-faced Storm-Petrel on a sand patch off Wooded Island. The first major account of the birds of this island was provided by V. N. Serventy³ who visited in December–January 1940–1941. His brother D. L. Serventy also landed on the island on 10 December 1945. Next were visits by Green² who published details of the Aquinas College expedition carried out in August 1970; A. A. Burbidge visited on 22 March 1973; R. E. Johnstone on 23 August 1977, 8 October 1981 and 15 August 1983; K. Coate on 13 December 1987, 4 December 1988 and 6 November 1991 and P. J. Fuller and A. A. Burbidge on 17 December 1989 and 2 December 1991.

Breeding Seabirds and Status

Puffinus assimilis Little Shearwater — About 3 000 breeding pairs. Most burrows are in the sandy dune along the northern side and in sand and guano along the western side and around the southern end of the lagoon. Burrows range from 50 cm to 100 cm long and had a density of 1.2–1.4/m² in August 1977. On 15 August 1983, most burrows had been freshly re-excavated and were ready for eggs; 12 were examined and all were empty. On 22–28 August 1970, Green¹ heard calls from some burrows which were undoubtedly adults. On 23 August 1977, most burrows contained a single adult sitting on a well incubated egg. In October 1981, burrows contained downy young. On 6 November, 1991 burrows contained almost fledged young. On 10 December 1945, most burrows were empty and some dead birds (probably young) were found on the surface.



● Morley Island (looking south); Crake Island in the foreground and Wooded Island in the background.

Photo: S. Fowler

Pelagodroma marina White-faced Storm-Petrel — About 700 breeding pairs. About 300 burrows are situated in the dune with *Spinifex*, *Senecio* and *Nitraria* along the northern side; some 200 are in a sandy area on the western side and 150–200 in a flat sandy area 60 m × 40 m on the southern end. Most burrows are steep and narrow to a depth of about 80 cm and usually dug in deep white sand with or without vegetation. Adults return to the island in late August and eggs are laid in the second week of October. Young hatch in late November or early December. On 13 December 1987 one burrow contained a downy chick with some feathers developing.

Larus pacificus Pacific Gull — Several pairs probably breed on the island. Three adults, two immatures and one juvenile were seen in August 1977.

Sterna fuscata Sooty Tern — A common visitor from late August to early May in the Abrolhos. In December 1945 birds were on eggs under *Atriplex* and *Nitraria*.

Sterna anaethetus Bridled Tern — On 10 December 1945, D. L. Serventy reported an occasional Bridled Tern flying out from under the undercut cliffs margining the beach. One egg was found.

Sterna nereis Fairy Tern — In December 1945, 40 pairs were breeding on a small promontory. Nests were unlined scrapes and contained one or two eggs.

Anous tenuirostris Lesser Noddy — About 16 000 breeding pairs. All nests are in mangroves around the lagoon. This colony was first noted in the summer of 1940–1941 when V. N. Serventy² found about 1 000 breeding birds. Strangely none was recorded when D. L. Serventy visited the island in December 1945. By 1970 they were re-established on the island. Johnstone⁴ found 5 000 birds breeding in late August 1977, and 3 000–4 000 in early October 1981. On 23 August 1977, Johnstone counted 2 585 active nests (i.e. with birds in attendance or with fresh weed), a mean of 18 nests per tree on the lagoon. In December 1989, P. J. Fuller and A. A. Burbidge estimated the number of nests at 16 375, and 11 745 in December 1991. Eggs are laid from mid-August to late November.

Factors Affecting Status

This island has an excellent anchorage and beach and is frequently visited by yacht crews and fishing parties. There is, however, little evidence of human interference. Some breeding seabirds and nestlings are probably taken by Ospreys *Pandion haliaetus* and White-bellied Sea-Eagles *Haliaeetus leucogaster*.

OTHER VERTEBRATES

On 8 October 1981 three Australian Sea-lions *Neophoca cinerea* comprising one bull, one adult cow and a pup about a year old were present. On 4 December 1988 one adult cow and four large young were observed. The gecko *Phyllodactylus marmoratus* and the skinks *Cryptoblepharus carnabyi* and *Menetia greyii* are recorded for the island.

Other Seabirds Recorded

<i>Phalacrocorax varius</i>	Pied Cormorant
<i>Haematopus fuliginosus</i>	Sooty Oystercatcher
<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>	Caspian Tern
<i>Sterna dougallii</i>	Roseate Tern
<i>Sterna bergii</i>	Crested Tern

Banding

Nil.

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