

# SEABIRD ISLANDS

# No. 219

## Pelican Rock, Great Barrier Reef, Queensland

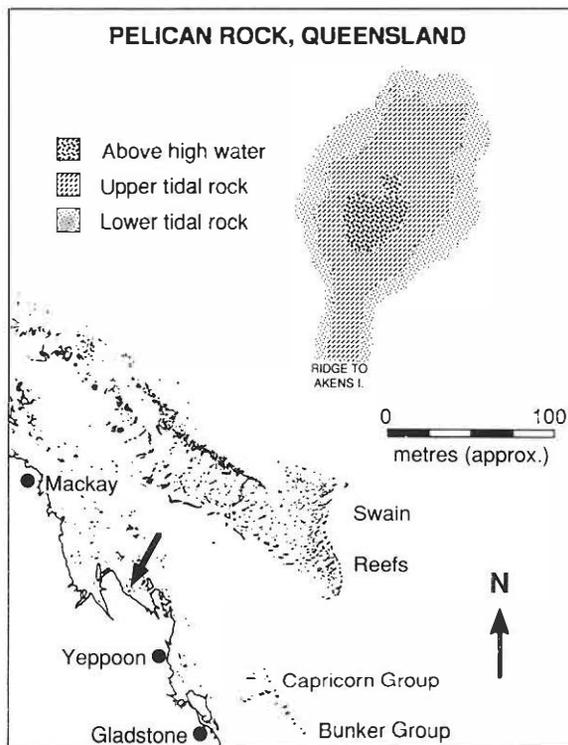
**Location:** 22°20'S, 150°15'E; 6 kilometres from the western shore of Shoalwater Bay and 1 700 m north of Akens Island, on the central coast of Queensland.

**Status:** Part of the Shoalwater Bay Department of Defence training reserve.

**Other Names:** There are no other names. However, two other 'Pelican Rocks' and two 'Pelican Islands' are officially gazetted in the Great Barrier Reef waters. The name is also used locally for other rocks and islets along the coast.

**Description:** Roughly 0.1 ha of this gently sloping rock is above highest spring tide. Small sand patches at the south and north are beaches at high tide. Low herbs and grasses occur. In November 1986 the dominant plant was *Portulaca oleracea*. Also present were *Solanum americanum*, *Tribulus cistoides*, *Amaranthus viridis*, *Eleusine indica*, *Sporobolus virginicus*, an unidentified grass and a few specimens of *Abutilon asiaticum* and *Opuntia stricta*. A prominent 3 m high rock outcrop at the northern side has stunted woody specimens of an unidentified species and *Alectryon connatus*. A southern long thin rocky spit connects to Akens Island and might be exposed on the lowest spring tides.

**Landing:** Landing is not possible without frightening the pelicans away and is therefore inadvisable. Caution is required due to a 10 m tidal range, exceptionally strong tidal currents and seabed of bare rock. The area is periodically closed to entry during military exercises. Entry is prohibited to waters surrounding the rock from April to



October during Seasonal Closure under the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act and the Queensland Marine Park Act.

**Ornithological History:** Pelican Rock was presumably named after its pelican colony but references to the island or its birds were not located. The rock was visited by R. A. Birtles on 3 June 1975; T. A. Walker<sup>1</sup> on 5 November 1986; S. B. Domm on 21 March 1986, 23 January 1989, 3 May 1989

and 26 June 1989; and C. J. Limpus on 7 July 1986 and 17 July 1988. When pelicans were breeding, observations were made from a boat without landing.

### Breeding Seabirds and Status

*Pelecanus conspicillatus* Australian Pelican — About 220–300 birds, 12 nests with eggs, and two large chicks were present in March 1986. In January 1989 sixty adults were present with about 100 young ranging from small chicks to unfledged juveniles. Birds, bodies and evidence of past nesting were recorded on other visits. A long-time fisherman in the area, N. Keys, said that pelicans were always present and often breeding. In one major breeding event the rock was covered with nests and he counted 570 birds in the air.

*Phalacrocorax varius* Pied Cormorant — Nine old nests and 10 birds were present in July 1986. Eight old nests and 40 birds were observed in November 1986. In July 1988 there were seven old nests (three with unhatched eggs). All nests were on the wooded north rock. About 50 birds were present on this rock in June 1989 and nesting appeared to be in progress.

*Egretta sacra* Eastern Reef Egret — A nest with two small chicks and an empty nest were present on the wooded rock in November 1986. Up to four grey birds were seen on occasions and in July 1988 a white bird and an old nest were noted.

*Haematopus fuliginosus* Sooty Oystercatcher — Four adults were present with two small runners in November 1986. Up to six birds have been observed.

*Larus novaehollandiae* Silver Gull — Five birds and six nests were present in July 1986. In November 1986 there were 60 gulls, eight nests containing one or two eggs and eight empty nests. In July 1988 there were 10 gulls, three nests with eggs and 14 empty nests. About 65 gulls and one nest were present in June 1989.

*Hydroprogne caspia* Caspian Tern — More than 20 nests with eggs and hatching chicks were present in June 1975. In June 1989 there were 10 nests with eggs and 25 adults. Birds were not seen on other visits.

*Sterna bergii* Crested Tern — In November 1986<sup>1</sup> 30 birds with four nests containing eggs were present. Birds were not present on other visits.

### Factors Affecting Status

The effects of artillery and military training in the area apparently are minor and the rock is not visited by defence personnel. The prohibited military zone reduces visitation or interference by the public although a few local fishermen are permitted to fish for crabs in the area. Shark predation may be significant to the pelican population as several carcasses have been found in stomachs of sharks caught near Pelican Rock.

Nesting pelicans are particularly sensitive to human presence. The only other pelican colonies on the Great Barrier Reef are at a few coral cays off Cape York Peninsula. The small size of Pelican Rock physically restricts the number of nests that can occur at one time. During peak years pelican nesting spills over onto adjacent Akens Island.



• The northern rock outcrop (looking north).

Photo: T. A. Walker



- *Pelican Rock (looking north).*

Photo: S. B. Domm

#### Other Seabirds Recorded

<i>Ardea novaehollandiae</i>	White-faced Heron (uncommon)
<i>Haematopus longirostris</i>	Pied Oystercatcher (uncommon)
<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>	Gull-billed Tern (rare)

#### Banding

Nil.

#### Bibliography

1. Walker, T. A. (1988). Crested Terns *Sterna bergii* on the southern Great Barrier Reef islands 1985–1986. *Corella* 12: 53–56.

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*T. A. Walker, P.O. Box 691, Townsville, Queensland 4810.*

*S. B. Domm, National Parks and Wildlife Service, P.O. Box 1395, Rockhampton, Queensland 4700.*

*C. J. Limpus, National Parks and Wildlife Service, P.O. Box 5391, Townsville, Queensland 4810.*

*R. A. Birtlex, Department of Marine Biology, James Cook University, Townsville, Queensland 4811.*