

SEABIRD ISLANDS

No. 163

Eshelby Island, Great Barrier Reef, Queensland

Location: 20°01' S., 148°37' E.; about 37 kilometres east of Bowen, Qld and 8 kilometres north-east of George Point on the mainland, at the northern end of the Whitsunday Islands region.

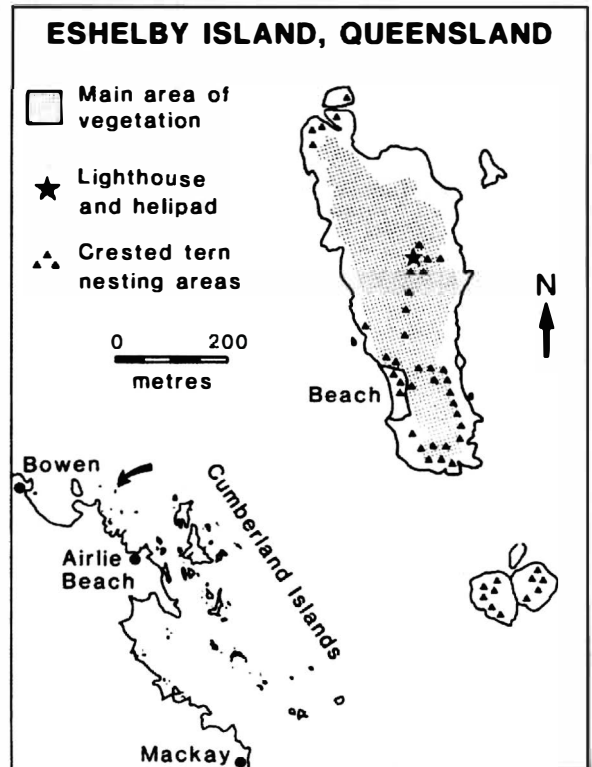
Status: Commonwealth Lighthouse Reserve.

Description: 11.5 ha (main island); about 700 m long by 250 m at the widest part. It is a steep-sided elongated island rising to 50 m, with a large detached rock 200 m to the south. The baserock is pink granite and the small beach consists of coral shingle. The southern rock is slightly more than a hectare in area. The island crest is mildly sloping or flat in places and relatively easy to traverse. An automatic lightstation is situated on the central high point. Prior to conversion of the light to solar power a vehicular service road existed from the main beach to the summit.

The island has a diverse flora and is thickly wooded in many places with *Ficus* sp., *Pisonia grandis* and *Paraserianthes toona* up to 5.5 m high. *Argusia argentea* and *Pandanus* sp. occur behind the beach. A grassed area extends from the beach on to the ridge top on the south-eastern side and to the lightstation on the northern side.

Landing: Onto the beach on the south-western side. There is a calm-weather anchorage off the beach.

Ornithological History: There are two records in the literature. Wheeler and Watson¹ reported the Silver Gull nesting on Eshelby Island (misprinted Estelley I.) in 1960. Bennett² published a photograph with the caption "Bridled Terns, *Sterna anaetheta*, congregate in large numbers on the rocky slopes, above the shingle beach on Eschelby [sic] Island, east of Bowen." T. Walker and/or E. Hegerl visited the island on 31 January, 13 July, 8, 10 and 16 November and 23-24 December 1985. A further visit was made on 15-16 January 1986. The duration of the visits ranged from 15 minutes to eight hours.



Breeding Seabirds and Status

Larus novaehollandiae Silver Gull — Reported to nest in 1960¹ but nesting was not observed during 1985-86. The maximum number of birds counted in summer was 21, but others may have been obscured by the numerous terns.

Sterna anaetheta Bridled Tern — Breeding on all visits except for July when none was present. Nesting is not synchronized and in January all stages of young from a single egg to fledglings occurred. Nests are concealed under grass, shrubs, trees or rock crevices over the whole island and also on the southern rock. Accurate counting was not possible but estimates were extrapolated both from photographs of flying birds taken above sections of the island and from counts of birds visible in sections of grassed areas. Between 2 500 and 4 000 pairs were estimated to nest in 1984-85 and 1985-86 seasons.

Sterna bergii Crested Tern — Found breeding in summer in both years. They were not present in the July visit. In 1985-86 nesting was not observed in November but on 24 December about 2 560 nests (1 or rarely 2 eggs) were present on the main island and an estimated 1 000 nests on the southern rock. In January, 22 days later, most nests were abandoned and colonies were present at new sites (a total of 1 750 nests).

Factors Affecting Status

The cause of the Crested Tern colony desertion in January is not known. Weather records showed no notable storms or unusual meteorological conditions during that period. Visiting sightseers interfere with nesting and this was observed on two occasions when groups of people from yachts tramped through the tern colonies. All parts of the disused road from the beach to the light were occupied by nesting Crested and Bridled Terns. High mortality would have occurred when vehicles used the road during nesting months. The new light is serviced by helicopter. The landing pad is beside the light and in 1985-86 Crested Terns were nesting around and upon the pad. Under those conditions helicopter landing would cause mortality of birds on the ground and in the air.

Remains of Bridled Terns were found under roosting branches and nests of White-bellied Sea-Eagles *Haliaeetus leucogaster* (2 adults and an immature) and/or Ospreys *Pandion haliaetus* (2 adults and an immature). On one occasion an immature sea-eagle was seen eating a Bridled Tern. Silver Gulls presumably rob tern eggs and chicks; however, this was not observed during the visits in marked contrast with other islands. A few living and dead Bridled Terns were entangled in the sticky fruit of the pisonia trees and presumably this is a minor cause of mortality.

OTHER VERTEBRATES

Major Skinks *Egernia frerei* are present and are large enough (35 cm long) to predate tern eggs. Snakes were not observed on the island but may be present since they have been observed on nearby Double Cone Island.

Eshelby Island supports the largest Bridled Tern colony in eastern Australia and one of the largest Crested Tern colonies in Australia. It is



● Eshelby Island (looking east).

Photo: T. A. Walker

the only major seabird nesting island along 800 km in the central region of the Great Barrier Reef.

Other Seabirds Recorded

<i>Sula leucogaster</i>	Brown Booby
<i>Egretta sacra</i>	Eastern Reef Egret
<i>Haematopus fuliginosus</i>	Sooty Oystercatcher
<i>Sterna bengalensis</i>	Lesser Crested Tern
<i>Anous stolidus</i>	Common Noddy
	(2 700, 15 Jan. 86)

Banding

Nil.

Bibliography

1. Wheeler, W. R. and I. Watson (1963). The Silver Gull *Larus novaehollandiae* Stephens. *Emu* 63: 99-173.
2. Bennett, I. (1971). The Great Barrier Reef. Lansdowne Press, Melbourne.

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T. A. Walker, P.O. Box 1479, Rockhampton, Qld. 4700.
E. J. Hegerl, Australian Littoral Society, P.O. Box 49, Moorooka, Qld. 4105.