

EDITORIAL

THE SEABIRD ISLANDS SERIES 1973-1988

In 1973 the Australian Bird Study Association launched a series of publications on 'Seabird Islands' to record succinctly our knowledge, past and present, of the breeding status of seabirds on the islands around the Australian coast. The objects were to stimulate an interest in visiting these islands to obtain information, to enable changes in distribution and abundance of seabird colonies to be recognized and their significance appraised, and to produce that volume of data necessary for responsible land usage along our coasts, and the conservation of seabirds dependant upon coastal habitats. Over 200 islands have now been described and their general distribution around the Australian coast may be seen in Figure 1. The success of the project has been remarkable.

Clearly there is a long way to go as a complete appraisal cannot be given until all potential seabird breeding islands have been visited. However, in some regions the coverage is already good. All the islands of the 'inhospitable' coast of New South Wales have been described. Also, there are accounts for most of the islands along the coast of Victoria. There is a good coverage of the imposing rocky stacks and islands to the south of Tasmania with an impressive avifauna of albatrosses, shearwaters and prions. Most remarkable is the number of islands of the Great Barrier Reef with their tropical assemblages that have been described, and the biologically interesting south-west corner of Western Australia is well represented.

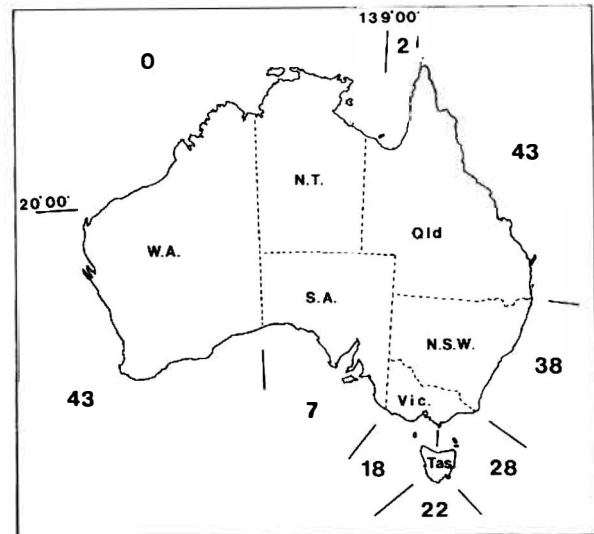


Figure 1. The number of Seabird Islands which have been described from various stretches of the Australian coast.

One of the important regions of Australia is Bass Strait and here many more islands require to be examined before the quantity of knowledge becoming available from recent extensive oceanographic studies can be utilized. Another important region is the South Australian coast which is poorly represented and requires a major effort.

No islands have been described from north of latitude 20°00'S. in Western Australia to longitude 139°00'E. in the Gulf of Carpentaria which represents nearly a third of the Australian coastline. This is a region which is probably of more biological significance than hitherto realized now that the importance of the Leeuwin Current that flows from north to south along the western Australian coast is being appreciated. Considerable movements of seabirds from the Pacific Ocean into the Indian Ocean by way of the Arafura and Timor seas are now strongly suspected (see Stokes and Dun 1989, *Corella* 13: 62). Australia and Indonesia have recently negotiated a treaty to clarify claims to the seabed for oil exploration in the Timor Sea so developments likely to affect this area can be expected in the near future. Yet we know little of the seabirds of the area and nothing of their breeding within the area. There is an urgent need to assess the seabirds, and the islands they frequent, along this part of the Australian coast.

Repeated visits to islands provide the data which enable changes to be recognized and their significance rated. Probably the best documented islands are the Five Islands, New South Wales, and here changes have continued with recent further increases in breeding Silver Gulls *Larus novaehollandiae*, Kelp Gulls *L. dominicanus* and now Australian Pelicans *Pelecanus conspicillatus*. A rapid increase in numbers of Kelp Gulls and White-fronted Terns *Sterna striata* in the Bass Strait is occurring, yet another reason for the urgency in completing the exploration of islands in this region and the regular revisiting of key islands. Changes in gull distribution and abundance began at least 20 years ago, were well established 10 years ago and have gathered momentum in recent years. Accompanying the increases in numbers of some species have been declines in abundance of others; the loss of White-faced

Storm Petrels *Pelagodroma marina* from the Five Islands, and the more recent decline in breeding Little Terns *S. albifrons* in south-eastern Australia. These changes are not solely local — the Black-winged Petrel *Pterodroma nigripennis* now breeds on Norfolk Island and Lord Howe Island and a few are suspected on the New South Wales coast. The Providence Petrel *P. solandri* is now sighted regularly off the east coast of Australia and has recently been found breeding at Philip Island, Norfolk Island, from where it was thought to have been exterminated almost 200 years ago. The discovery of Herald Petrels *P. arminjoniana* breeding at Raine Island in the Coral Sea and more recently found ashore at the Cocos (Keeling) Islands in the Indian Ocean reflect the better coverage now available from these outlying islands. Buller's Shearwater *Puffinus bulleri* is increasing in numbers in New Zealand and many other changes have been noted elsewhere in the world. The status of seabirds is far from static; dynamic changes are currently in progress and the causes need to be sought.

There is increasing evidence that the activities of man are affecting ecosystems and it is likely that herein lie some of the causes of these observed changes in seabird abundance and distribution. Fortunately the Seabird Islands Series began in time to provide some base lines but it is imperative that the momentum created is not lost. It is already clear that islands should be revisited every five years if changes are to be recorded adequately, and more frequently on selected islands to determine the rate of change.

It is proposed to analyse in detail the available data from each biological region and publish the conclusions in forthcoming issues devoted to oceanic and coastal birds. These analyses will define future objectives and enable all to see where an immediate contribution is required.