

SEABIRD ISLANDS

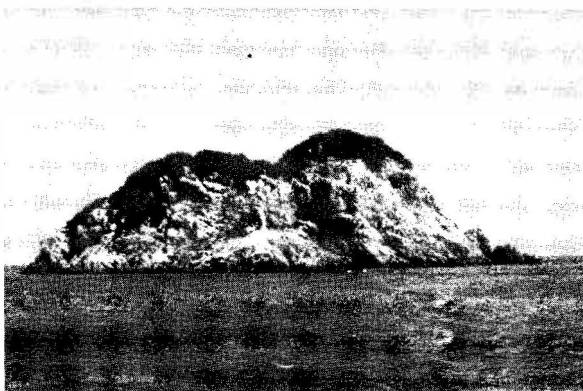
No. 198

Redbill Island, Great Barrier Reef, Queensland

Location: 20°58'S., 150°05'E.; 90 kilometres east of Mackay, Queensland, it is, from the mainland, the most distant continental (rocky) island of the Great Barrier Reef south of Torres Strait.

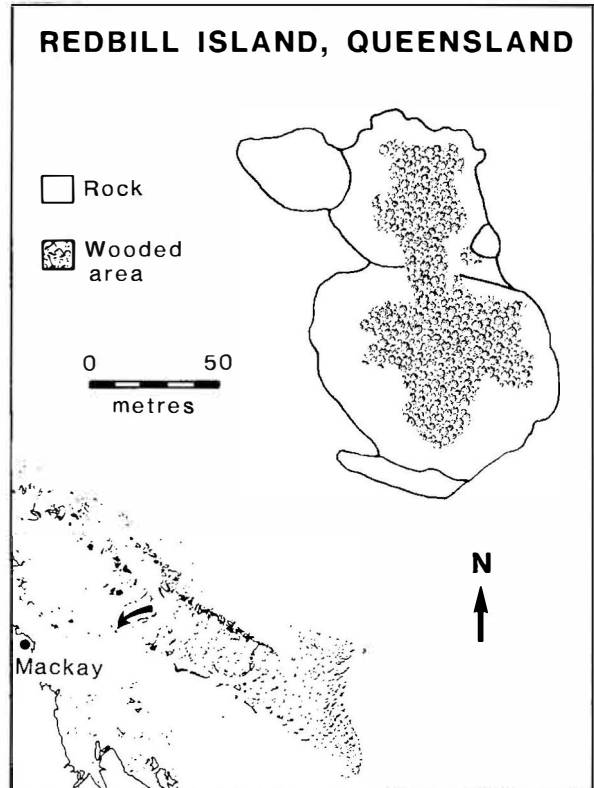
Status: Vacant Crown Land; Queensland Fauna Sanctuary.

Description: 1 ha; 150 m × 50 m, it is a steep granite outcrop rising to 23 m above a 900 ha oval-shaped coral reef of 5.5 km maximum length. The island is 130 m from the south-western crest of the reef and there is a forested coral cay, Bushy Island, 1.3 km to the north on the same reef^{2,4,5}. The upper slopes of Redbill Island support a dense thicket of strangler figs *Ficus obliqua* interspersed with fewer than 20 *Pisonia grandis* trees (up to 3 m high). Guano-covered rock and pockets of brown humic soil with scattered *Plumbago zeylonica* occur beneath the trees. The lower slopes are mainly bare with a scatter of grasses and herbs. In January 1987, these were *Portulaca oleracea*, *Boerhavia tetrandra*, *Lepturus repens*, *Abutilon indicum*, *Euphorbia tannensis*, *Achyranthes aspera*, *Myoporum acuminatum*, *Tribulus cistoides* and *Passiflora foetida*.



● Redbill Island (looking east).

Photo: T. A. Walker



Landing: At high tide by climbing onto rocks from a dinghy (calm seas only). At low tide by walking from the reef edge or from Bushy Island. The reef provides a poor anchorage and the tidal range is in excess of 5 m.

Ornithological History: Austin¹ visited on 19 November 1907 and recorded "an immense rookery of Reef-Herons (*Demigretta sacra*) and Panayan Terns (*Sterna anaetheta*), all nesting together". T. Walker surveyed birds on 24 January 1984, 13 January 1986, 10 November 1986 and 19 January 1987. G. Allen made occasional visits in 1986.

Breeding Seabirds and Status

Egretta sacra Eastern Reef Egret — At least 180 were counted on the reef flat in 1984. Over 100 were present on the island in January and November 1986 at high tide. Up to four nests with eggs or chicks were found during January and November visits. Nests are constructed on rock or in *Ficus* or *Pisonia* trees. Most birds were of the white colour morph.

Larus novaehollandiae Silver Gull — A nest with eggs was reported in June 1986. Gulls were rarely seen at the island.

Sterna anaethetus Bridled Tern — Present between October and January. In January 1984 there were 200 adults and fledgelings flying about. In January 1986 eggshells, feathers and a few bodies were all that remained. In November 1986 there were about 150 birds with nests and eggs. In January 1987 nearly all young had fledged although one chick was found. Nesting occurs in rock crevices or under vegetation, mainly on the lower slopes on all sides of the island.

Factors Affecting Status

Although it supports a large population of Eastern Reef Egrets Redbill Island is not a major seabird nesting island as was previously claimed^{1,3}. The possibility cannot be discounted that the Bridled Tern colony has decreased in association with vegetation changes since only three plant species were recorded in 1972⁵. These species were not recorded in 1987 although *Ficus obliqua* might have been misidentified as *F. opposita* in 1972.

Remains of Bridled Terns, Black Noddies, Eastern Reef Egrets or Crested Terns were sometimes found at raptor feeding sites. White-bellied Sea-Eagles *Haliaeetus leucogaster* and Ospreys *Pandion haliaetus* frequent the island and falcons were seen to visit on occasions⁴. Eastern Reef Egrets possibly predate eggs and chicks of Bridled Terns and a small amount of tern mortality may result from entanglement in *Pisonia* fruit. Human influence is negligible as the island is inhospitable and is rarely visited.



● East side of the island.

Photo: T. A. Walker

Other Seabirds Recorded

<i>Haematopus fuliginosus</i>	Sooty Oystercatcher (rare)
<i>Sterna bergii</i>	Crested Tern (dead only)
<i>Anous minutus</i>	Black Noddy (dead only)

Banding

Nil.

Bibliography

1. Austin, T. P. (1908). A visit to the Great Barrier Reef. *Emu* 7: 176-178.
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3. Lavery, H. J. and Grimes, R. J. (1971). Seabirds of the Great Barrier Reef. *Qld. Agric. J.* 97: 106-113.
4. Walker, T. A. (1988). Birds of Bushy Island (with a summary of the nesting status of bird species on southern Great Barrier Reef cays). *Sunbird* 17: 52-58.
5. Wallace, C. C. and Lovell, E. R. (1977). Topography and coral distribution of Bushy and Redbill Islands and surrounding reef, Great Barrier Reef, Queensland. *Atoll Res. Bull.* No. 194.

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