

## SEABIRD ISLANDS

No. 150

## Bird Islands, Great Barrier Reef, Queensland

**Location:** 11° 47' S., 143° 05' E.; 25 kilometres north-west of Cape Grenville, Qld.

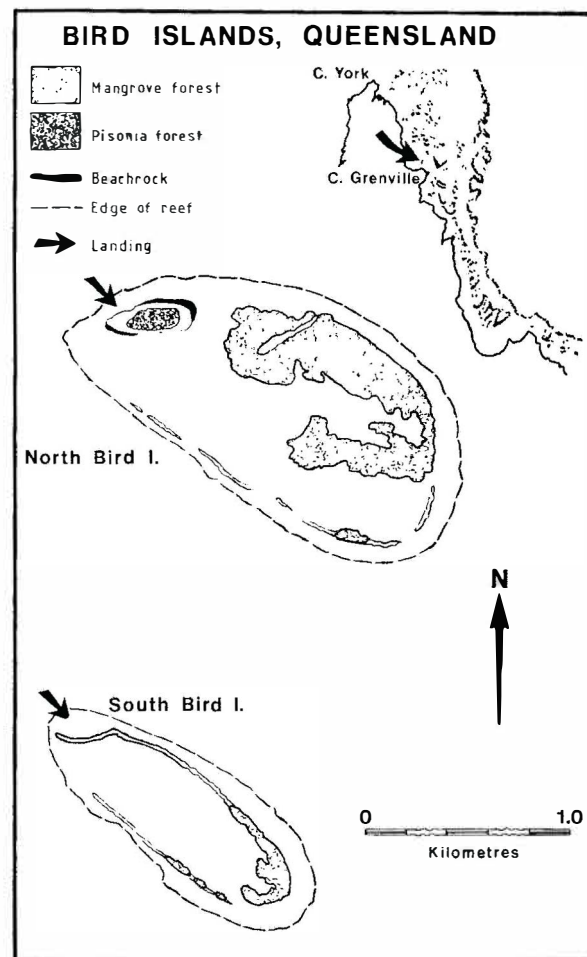
**Status:** Vacant Crown Land; Queensland Fauna Sanctuary.

**Other Names:** Bird Islets, Bird Isles. For convenience, the names North Bird Isle and South Bird Isle are used here.

**Description:** A pair of "low wooded islands" on adjacent coral reefs of the inner waters of the far northern Great Barrier Reef. A "low wooded island" as defined by Hopley<sup>3</sup> consists of a coral reef with a seaward coral shingle rampart, a leeward cay and a mangrove forest in the lee of the shingle rampart. North Bird Isle has a forested sand cay 250 m by 100 m and an extensive mangrove area. South Bird Isle has one small islet and fringing mangrove areas on the reef. The islet has mangroves and *Sesuvium*. The mangrove communities of both islands are dominated by extensive stands of *Rhizophora*, *Avicennia* and other mangrove species. The cay of North Bird Isle is vegetated with an outer dune community of grasses and shrubs and a central forest community dominated by *Erythrina* trees and some *Pisonia grandis*. Ramparts of coralline beachrock border much of the cay's edges.

**Landing:** Onto the beach on the western side of the cays of both islets. Anchorage is obtained in south-easterly weather on the north-western side of each reef.

**Ornithological History:** The earliest reference to these islands is by James Cook<sup>1</sup> who anchored off the islands on 20 August, 1770 and observed from his ship "on the Isles we saw a good many birds which occasioned my calling them Bird Isles". Thomas Huxley and John MacGillivray<sup>6</sup>, in HMS *Rattlesnake*, landed about 1 October, 1858 and observed breeding Roseate and Black-naped Terns. W. MacGillivray<sup>7</sup> landed on about 31 October, 1910 to note that "expectations formed from the name are not to be realised",



and recorded only Eastern Reef Egrets and several waders. W. McLennan<sup>8</sup> landed on 1 July, 1911 and recorded Silver Gulls breeding, and also Sooty Oystercatchers, Black-naped Terns, a dead Black Noddy and other species. From published sources, Lavery and Grimes<sup>5</sup>, Kikkawa<sup>4</sup> and Serventy *et al.*<sup>9</sup> refer to Bird Islands as the breeding ground for several species of seabirds. Recently, C. J. Limpus visited North Bird Isle on 6 March, 1975 and overnight on 8/9 December, 1976; he also made observations from the air

on 14 June, 1984. B. R. King visited both isles for two hours each on 21 June 1981. On these visits records of vegetation and seabirds were made.

### Breeding Seabirds and Status

*Larus novaehollandiae* Silver Gull — Breeding in mid-year, with widely scattered pairs nesting on the ground among the grasses and shrubs of the perimeter of the North Isle cay. Nests were lined with a small amount of vegetation and placed on the ground, well concealed under the shelter of overhanging shrubs and grasses. One or two eggs formed the clutch. Often nests were only detected by the presence of the defending pair of adults. Runner chicks were similarly difficult to locate. At least four nests and two runners were present in June, 1981.

*Hydroprogne caspia* Caspian Tern — Found breeding in mid-year. The only record is of a single pair nesting in June, 1981 on North Bird Isle. The nest, located by the defence behaviour of the adults, was placed on the ground among low vegetation of the outer grass/shrub area on the lagoon side of the cay. The nest was a shallow depression in the sand with vegetable material forming the sides; it contained two eggs.

*Sterna dougallii* Roseate Tern — Breeding recorded in October, 1848<sup>6</sup>. There are no recent breeding records.

*Sterna sumatrana* Black-naped Tern — Recorded breeding in October, 1848<sup>6</sup>. There are no recent breeding records.

*Anous minutus* Black Noddy — Found breeding in "thousands" (4 000 + pairs) in March, 1975. The colony is located in the mangroves (mainly *Rhizophora*) of North Bird Isle and consists of several thousand nests. The colony is unusual in that a mangrove forest is used instead of the usual *Pisonia* forest. Nests are constructed of mangrove leaves cemented together with guano.

North Bird cay and possibly the mangroves of South Bird Isle are used as a roost by these birds, but no nesting has been recorded.

### Factors Affecting Status

The islands are seldom visited although they are near the main shipping channel and trawling areas. Occasionally they are used as an anchorage by fishing boats or trawlers; careless

behaviour by visitors could cause some disturbance to nesting seabirds. Hawksbill Turtles *Eretmochelys imbricata* nest in small numbers on the cay throughout the year; their activities disturb some groundnesting seabirds. Silver Gulls and Rufous Night Herons *Nycticorax caledonicus* and Eastern Reef Egrets may predate some noddy chicks or eggs.

### Other Seabirds Recorded

<i>Phalacrocorax varius</i>	Pied Cormorant
<i>Fregata ariel</i>	Least Frigatebird
<i>Egretta sacra</i>	Eastern Reef Egret
<i>Haematopus longirostris</i>	Pied Oystercatcher
<i>Haematopus fuliginosus</i>	Sooty Oystercatcher
<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>	Gull-billed Tern
<i>Sterna bergii</i>	Crested Tern
<i>Sterna albifrons</i>	Little Tern <sup>2</sup>

### Banding

Nil.

### Bibliography

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### Acknowledgements

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See photos page 86.

December, 1982. In winter the nests were located in an area of sparse *Portulaca* and *Boerhavia* in the central grassflat. In summer the nesting area covered the whole island with the majority of nests located in the central grassflat. Nests are built on the ground and are lined mainly with small driftwood sticks and other flotsam, with some vegetation from the island.

*Sterna fuscata* Sooty Tern — Breeds in mid-year. In June, 1981, there were about 200 juveniles and some 50 nests with eggs or small chicks, at the north-eastern end of the vegetated area.

*Sterna anaethetus* Bridled Tern — Breeds in summer. About 10 pairs were present in December, 1982, scattered through the vegetated area.

*Anous stolidus* Common Noddy — Breeds in mid-year with only a few birds present in December. In June, 1981, there were about 300 adult birds on the cay, with a large number of mainly juveniles and some younger chicks distributed amongst the vegetation. Nest were built on vegetation, and clumps of *Lepturus* grass are the preferred sites.

### Factors Affecting Status

Green Turtles *Chelonia mydas* nest over much of the cay during summer. Their movements and digging affect both the vegetation and nesting

seabirds. Silver Gulls, with only a maximum of 12 recorded, heavily predate unattended eggs and small chicks.

### Other Seabirds Recorded

<i>Larus novaehollandiae</i>	Silver Gull
<i>Sterna dougallii</i>	Roseate Tern
<i>Sterna sumatrana</i>	Black-naped Tern
<i>Sterna bergii</i>	Crested Tern
<i>Sterna bengalensis</i>	Lesser Crested Tern

### Banding

Nil.

### Bibliography

1. Kikkawa, J. (1976), The Birds of the Great Barrier Reef. Chapter 5 in Jones, C. A. and R. Endean (Eds), 1976. Biology and Geology of Coral Reefs, Vol. III: 297-341. Academic Press, New York.
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## BIRD ISLANDS



• Upper-North Bird Isle; Lower-South Bird Isle (looking north).



• North Bird Isle.

Photos: D. Hopley