

Decline of the Gannetry on Cat Island, Tasmania

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Cat Island, Tasmania, is one of the few breeding places within Australia of the Australian Gannet *Morus serrator*. It is the most accessible of the gannetries and has been the focus of attention for many visitors since Flinders first surveyed the islands in the area. Apparently the gannetry was discovered by Flinders but he made only incidental mention of it in his book (1814, p. cxii). He stated that on 8 January 1799 'Mr. Bass went on shore to the small, south-eastern islet [=Cat Island] whence he brought a boat load of seals and gannets.'

The following summary of the gannetry's history comes partly from an unpublished review of Australian gannetries (by D.L.S.) and partly from the files of the Tasmanian National Parks and Wildlife Service.

On 20 and 21 November, 1893, when a party from the Victorian Field Naturalists' Club landed, there were estimated to be between 2 400 and 2 600 birds on nests, the rookery being circular, of about 50 m diameter (Gabriel, 1894) and 150 m circumference (Campbell, 1894). D. Le Souef landed towards the end of November, 1901, and found only fresh eggs present (Le Souef, 1902). No estimate of the numbers was given but on 12 November, 1907, the nests covered about 0.4 ha (Atkinson in North, 1912), and much the same obtained on 4 December, 1908, (White, 1909). White described the arrival of the Australasian Ornithologists' Union party at the gannetry as follows: 'What a marvellous sight met our eyes! On this bare crest of the island was a Gannet (*Sula serrator*) rookery, an acre of living nesting birds, each sitting on a little raised mound of earth and *débris*, with a slight depression on the top, in which rested a single dirty-white egg. Each bird was just out of range of its neighbour's bill.'

Another member of the party, W. N. Atkins (1909) estimated that 5 000-7 000 birds were nesting, and yet another estimate from the same visit was between 8 000 and 10 000 gannets breeding (Mellor in Mathews, 1914). By late November, 1912, the numbers were said to have dropped (Mellor and White, 1913) and W. Finigan (Chisholm, 1959) recorded about 3 000. This trend seems to have continued, as on 23 October, 1935, 800-1 000 birds were nesting on well under 'an acre' (0.4 ha) (Anderson and Anderson, 1936) with bare areas around the colony*. It was stated that some fishermen had been taking the birds for bait and according to

Tasmanian Fauna Board (now the Tasmanian National Parks and Wildlife Service) files there had been 4 500-5 000 adult birds ashore earlier that year. †To deter further raids a warden, W. A. Riddle, was stationed on nearby Babel Island during parts of the 1935/36 and 1936/37 breeding seasons. On 18 January, 1937, about 500 chicks were being raised and 800-900 the

Month/Year or Season	Adults	Chicks
11/1893	2 400-2 600	
12/1908	5 000-10 000	
11/1912	3 000	
10/1935 * †	800-1 000	
1/1937 †	2 000	500
1937/38 †	2 300	800-900
1938/39 †	"a couple of thousand"	1 000
3/1943	100-150	
12/1944	Numbers very low.	
4/1945		14
12/1945	900	
3/1947	450	
1947/48	400	
1949/50	400-500	135 (?)
1950/51	200	55
1951/52	150	48
1953/54	100	Nil
1954/55 ‡	114	43
1955/56	140	45
1956/57	86	14
1957/58	67	16
1958/59	60	13
1959/60	42	17
	**	
1967/68	22	9
1968/69	26	5
1974/75	17	7
1975/76	12	7
2/1977	14	6

* † ‡ ** Refer to text.

following season. A hut was built on Cat Island in the summer of 1937/38; F. Nilsson was stationed there that season and W. A. Riddle in 1938/39 after which guarding ceased.

On 26 November, 1938, one of us (D.L.S.) landed on Cat Island from M.V. *Warreen* and made a brief survey of the birds present. A small sample of the gannet nests was counted and it was estimated that there was a total of 750-1 000 nests containing eggs and young in white down. However, the warden (Riddle) said that there were a 'couple of thousand' gannets present. At the time of observation he said that only a part of the birds were ashore but that they arrived from the feeding grounds at 11 a.m. and remained until 4 p.m. An aerial survey by S. Fowler a few days earlier (23 November at 8 a.m.) gave 1 028 nests—the mean of two counts.

Few data are available from the period of World War II except that about 100-150 gannets were seen on 6 March, 1943. But reports from December, 1944 show that the numbers were very low, with only about 14 young birds on 17 April. Aerial studies were made by S. Fowler in 1945 and 1946 but no young were identified although up to 900 adults were around on 18 December, 1945. On 23 March, 1947, a landing was made and some 450 adult gannets were seen: they seemed disorientated and weak and 'stumbled around' as the party approached. In 1947/48 400 adults were seen; in 1949/50 400-500 adults are thought to have raised 135 young; in 1950/51 there were 55 young, and in 1951/52 150 adults were counted and 48 young raised. In the next season about 100 adults were seen but no young reared. Then in 1954/55 114 adults were present and 43 young raised‡, this being the first post-war season during which a warden (A. D. Harland) was ashore for at least part of the breeding period. In the following year up to 140 adults raised 45 young. In 1956/57 14 chicks fledged, and in 1957/58 16 chicks were present with the maximum count of adults ashore that season being 67 on 4 December, 1957. In 1958/59 60 adults and 13 chicks were seen; in 1959/60 there were 42 adults and 17 chicks. **Wardens were no longer present after 1960 and counting lapsed until 1967/68 when 22 adults and 9 chicks were seen. In 1968/69 26 adults were counted with 5 chicks; in 1974/75 17 adults and 7 chicks were present in December; in 1975/76 12 adults and 7 chicks were recorded, and on 11 February,

1977, there were 14 adults and 4 large, 1 medium-sized and 1 small chick.

These figures show an appalling decrease in the 70 years since White's visit in 1908 (White, *loc. cit.*), mostly due to predation and vandalism by fishermen and others. The following table clearly shows this decline.

Numerous photographs of the gannetry have appeared, the first by Gabriel (1894), others by Campbell (1901), Lempriere (in White, 1909), North (1912), Barrett (1919), Cashion (1958) and Serventy *et al.* (1971). Le Souef (1902) reported a solitary gannet sitting on its egg among the cormorants on nearby Storehouse Island in late November, 1901. Research on gannets in 1957/58 concentrated on behaviour (Warham, 1958).

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