

SEABIRD ISLANDS

No. 73

Tasman Island, Tasmania

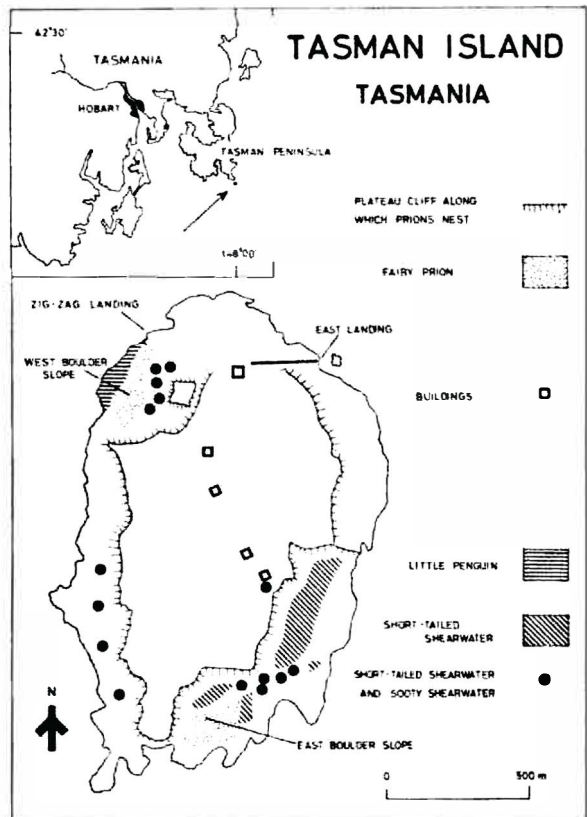
Location: 43° 14' S., 147° 56' E.; 3 km south of Tasman Peninsula on the south-east coast of Tasmania.

Status: Commonwealth territory under the control of the Department of Transport.

Description: 120 ha; 1.6 km long by 1 km wide and rising to 300 m. The average altitude of the plateau is about 280 m. The rugged shore-line of coastal cliffs is surmounted by very steep and often boulder-strewn slopes that rise to meet secondary cliffs surrounding a generally level plateau. Soils are mostly sandy peat and the cliffs are vertical columns of dolerite. About 100 species of plants were recorded, the following species being dominant: *Poa poiiformis*, *Tetragonia implexicoma* (coastal and foreshore), *Acacia verticillata*, *Banksia marginata* (scrub), *Helichrysum costatifructum*, *Leptospermum scoparium* (heaths).

A lighthouse and weather station consisting of three houses, numerous sheds and the light tower were permanently manned from the early 1900's until 1976 when the station was automated.

Landing: The most suitable sites for access are rocks on the eastern or western sides of the northern end of the island. A foot track known as the "Zig Zag" traverses the steep slope from the north-western landing site. At the north-eastern landing a trolley-haulage track extends



from the plateau to a landing stage some 10 metres above the sea. If sea conditions are suitable it is possible to land from a boat almost



• *Tasman Island (looking southward); the east landing stage is in the centre of the picture.*

anywhere around the shore. However, some difficulty may be encountered climbing up the steep slopes to reach the plateau if a landing is made elsewhere but the two sites mentioned.

Ornithological History: Jones¹, Robinson² and Sharland³, ⁴, refer to the breeding colonies of Sooty Shearwaters and Short-tailed Shearwaters on Tasman Island but no other species of seabirds were mentioned by them. N. P. Brothers visited the island from 13 to 19 December 1977, from 13 to 22 July 1978 and on 13 September 1978 for a third visit lasting only five hours. In addition to the shearwaters he recorded Little Penguins and Fairy Prions nesting.

Breeding Seabirds and Status

Eudyptula minor Little Penguin — Breeds among boulders on a small area along the west coast. This locality is the most suitable and accessible area for penguins to breed on the island. A few may occupy burrows in other areas but none was found. Penguins called regularly from the sea all round the island during the day. Estimated 200 breeding pairs.

Pachyptila turtur Fairy Prion — The main breeding population was found under the massive jumbles of boulders in two areas on the slopes referred to as east and west boulder slopes (see map). Outside these two areas the birds bred in all suitable crevices on all cliff faces but mainly on the secondary cliffs. Generally crevices were used for breeding, from only a few metres above sea level to the plateau edge, and only a few were found breeding in burrows. The east boulder slopes and all cliffs facing east

supported more birds than any other comparable areas on the island.

During the December visit the first prion chicks had just hatched. During the visit in July adult prions occupied the nesting sites at night and commenced arriving at 17:00 hours. Uncountable numbers of prions came ashore on the night of 20 July when there was an almost full moon and a light breeze blowing. On the following very dark night again with a light breeze but heavy cloud cover, few prions came ashore. It was difficult to obtain an accurate estimate of numbers because nests were located under boulders and in crevices. Nevertheless it is probably the largest Fairy Prion colony known in Tasmania. Estimated 25 000 breeding pairs.

Puffinus griseus Sooty Shearwater — Burrows of this species were sparsely scattered and appeared to be segregated from those of *P. tenuirostris*. The burrows were in steep slopes, particularly on the island's eastern and north-western sides. Because many were quite long it was not possible to reach all the birds to count them. From the ratio of the numbers of remains of these two species of *Puffinus* found on the island the maximum number of *P. griseus* was estimated to be 1 000 breeding pairs.

Puffinus tenuirostris Short-tailed Shearwater — Burrows of this species were concentrated on the eastern slopes north of the boulder slope in which the main Fairy Prion colony was located. *P. poiformis* and *Tetragonia implexicoma* occur here sometimes as a very dense ground cover making burrowing difficult. A few burrows occur along the western slope. Estimated 6 000 breeding pairs.

Factors Affecting Status

At present no seabirds breed anywhere on the plateau. According to former lighthouse keepers a rookery of *P. griseus* on the plateau, covering some 1.5 ha was ploughed up for use as a garden. It is not known when this occurred, but no birds have subsequently returned to the area.

Sheep were grazed on the island for many years though none remain. Grazing was confined to the plateau and may have had an effect on shearwater burrows.

For an island with such a long history of human habitation, it is surprising that neither the Black Rat *Rattus rattus* nor the House Mouse *Mus musculus* have become established.

About 30-35 feral cats *Felis catus* were found living on the island, mainly on the east and west boulder slopes. They killed many seabirds, particularly the Fairy Prions. One of a number of cat lairs contained the remains of 91 adult prions, 11 Sooty Shearwaters and one Short-tailed Shearwater. In December the diet of the cats appeared to consist mainly of prion chicks and eggs, although adult prions were still being killed. During the first two visits shooting and poisoning reduced the cat population to a few individuals. Eventually it is intended to eradicate the cats completely.

The Forest Raven *Corvus tasmanicus*, Brown Falcon *Falco berigora*, Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*, White-bellied Sea-Eagle *Haliaeetus leucogaster* and Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* have all been recorded and may take small numbers of seabirds or their eggs.

OTHER VERTEBRATES

Australian Fur Seals *Arctocephalus pusillus* were seen regularly in the sea around the island and occasionally sleeping on the rocky western shore. Four species of lizard have been recorded: *Tiliqua casuarinae*, *Egernia whitii*, *Leiopisma metallica* and *L. ocellata* are all quite common.

Other Seabirds Recorded

<i>Leucocarbo fuscescens</i>	Black-faced Shag
<i>Ardea novaehollandiae</i>	White-faced Heron
<i>Haematopus longirostris</i>	Pied Oystercatcher
<i>Larus novaehollandiae</i>	Silver Gull
<i>Sterna bergii</i>	Crested Tern

Banding

Nil.

Bibliography

1. Jones, F. W. (1936), 'The Breeding of the Sooty Shearwater (*Puffinus griseus*) on Tasman Island', *S. Aust. Orn.* 13: 197-200.
2. Robinson, F. N. (1964), 'The Breeding of the Sooty Shearwater on Courts Island, Tasmania, and Montagu Island, N.S.W.', *Emu* 63: 304-306.
3. Sharland, M. S. R. (1946), 'Sooty Shearwater in Tasmania', *Emu* 46: 228-229.
4. Sharland, M. S. R. (1956), 'Population Rise in Two Sea-birds', *Emu* 56: 75-79.



• The East Boulder Slope (looking north-east).

Acknowledgements

Transport and accommodation were provided by the Australian Department of Transport and for arranging this I am most grateful to Mr C. Tindall. I wish to thank Mr N. J. Mooney for valuable field assistance provided during the July visit. Mr M. J. Brown identified the plants, and Mr D. E. Rounsevell identified the lizards and also commented on the manuscript.

Date compiled:
20 September 1978.

N. P. Brothers,
National Parks and Wildlife Service,
Sandy Bay, Tas. 7005.