SEABIRD ISLANDS No. 74

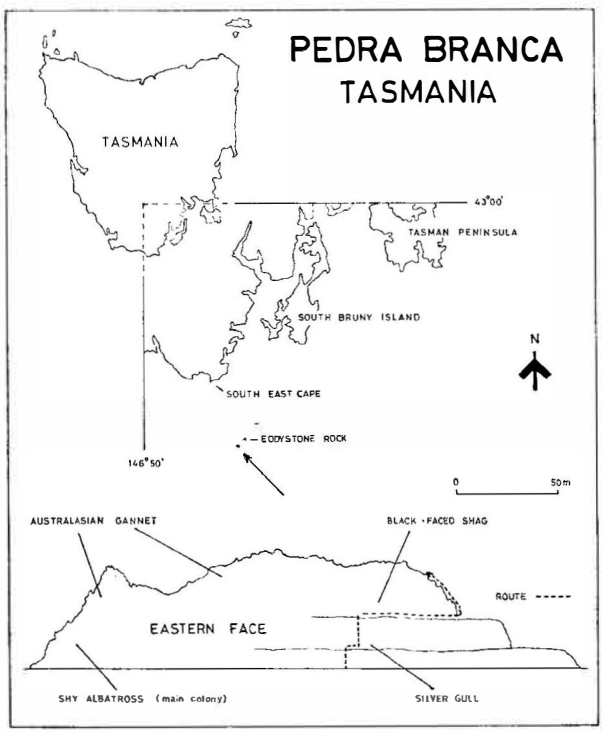
Pedra Branca, Tasmania

Location: 43° 51′ S., 146° 59′ E.; the southernmost Australian island, 26 km south-south-east of Whale Head, the nearest point of Tasmania's south coast.

Status: Incorporated in the South-west National Park.

Other Name: Pedra Blanca (commonly used and shown on some charts).

Description: 2.5 ha; 270 m long by 100 m wide with a maximum height of 60 m. The east and west slopes rise steeply to meet at a central ridge which runs in a north-south direction. The eastern face commences as a rock platform sloping gently up to meet the base of a 25 m high sheer rock face. Above the sheer face the rock becomes less steep thus making conditions suitable for seabirds to nest. The sheer rock-faces on the western slopes are smaller and broken by uniform flat ledges. The shore platform here is very flat and about 15 m wide. The central ridge rises gradually from the north to a peak then drops away to form a saddle between the first peak and the second peak, the highest part of the rock. From the highest peak the ridge drops rapidly away to the south. The nature of the rock does not provide any suitable nesting conditions either in crevices or in soil for burrowing birds. *Salicornia blackiana* is the only plant species found on the island; it is sparse and confined to rock cracks.



• *Pedra Branca (looking south-west).*

Landing: The most suitable site is on the north-east end where the slippery rock slopes gently up to meet a vertical cliff face. Once this cliff is reached the numerous suitable hand and foot holds make climbing relatively easy to a flat ledge round the northern tip to the west side; access to the ridge is then possible over the broken cliff face. Once on the ridge easy walking is possible throughout the nesting colonies.

Landing was achieved in a 20 knot west-south-west wind with a 4 m south-west swell, which made the actual landing from a dinghy difficult. Any worse conditions would have made it impossible. In fact, on five other occasions unfavourable weather had prevented previous landing on the island by Brothers. For safety it was necessary to rouse seals off the landing rock where they occupied all the space between the sea and the cliff face. No alternative safer landing sites exist.

Ornithological History: S. Fowler[1] visited Pedra Branca by boat on 3 March 1938 but did not land. He indicated that a gannet colony existed though he was unsure of the breeding status. During an aerial survey on 16 February 1939, his photographs "did not disclose the presence of the dark speckled young birds which might have been expected to be present at that time; nor did the adult birds appear to be nesting." Fowler also said "I have seen, and aerial photos show, a few albatrosses on the island". However, A. E. Palfreyman[1], [3] was the first man to make a landing on Pedra Branch, on 5 April 1947, and recorded only gannets which were nesting. Apparently he saw no albatrosses on the rock. Palfreyman (pers. comm.) made a second landing in January 1956. Although Serventy *et al.*[2] listed Pedra Branca as a breeding station for both species, at that time albatrosses had only been reported "on the island" without subsstantiation of the breeding status.

After a number of unsuccessful attempts due to unsuitable conditions, N. P. Brothers landed on Pedra Branca on 7 October 1978. Deteriorating weather conditions restricted the visit to 45 minutes ashore from 05:45 to 06:30 hours. The following detail resulted mainly from that visit.

Breeding Seabirds and Status

Diomedea cauta Shy Albatross — Ninety-seven birds sitting on nest mounds were counted on 7 October. Most nests were located in the south-east section of the island with numbers gradually decreasing northwards until the colony became quite sparse. There was no apparent segregation of albatross and gannet nests. Gannets' nests were interspersed amongst albatross nests and birds of either species appeared to be equally tolerant of one another. About 60 per cent of the albatrosses had laid and the remaining empty nests contained sitting birds. With a few exceptions nests were attended by single birds. One freshly laid egg was seen on a bare rock ledge with a bird standing nearby. Eggs laid in this manner may not be incubated and probably fall prey to gulls. Other nests were well constructed mounds of dirt about 150 mm in height despite the scarcity of suitable material on the rock. All birds on nests remained undisturbed when approached. Estimated 100 breeding pairs.

Morus serrator Australasian Gannet — at the time of Brother's visit about 100 birds were incubating. All eggs inspected were still streaked with blood indicating that they were freshly laid. Nests without eggs were attended by pairs of birds, invariably with one bird sitting on the nest. The nests were constructed of a layer of fresh seaweed about 30 mm in depth placed untidily on rock ledges. The use of seaweed in nest construction is probably a result of the dearth of soil. Apparently nests are constructed each season as no mounds of accumulated seaweed were found. Although incubating birds were particularly reluctant to leave their nests when approached, all birds usually shuffled a few metres when disturbed but quickly returned. The gannet colony covered the rock's east side from

some 18 m above sea level to the top of the central ridge. No birds were breeding on the western slopes nor on the east slope below the saddle which separates the two peaks; high seas may wash over these parts. Estimated 500-1 000 breeding pairs.

Leucocarbo fuscescens Black-faced Shag — two nests, neatly constructed of fresh seaweed on a rock ledge, were located on the western side of the northern tip about 25 m above sea level. Two eggs were being incubated in one nest while two birds were attending an empty nest one metre distant.

Larus novaehollandiae Silver Gull — Breeding had not commenced at the time of Brother's visit, although nests of small pebbles were found on a ledge 20 m above sea level at the north-east end of the rock. When investigating this area the gulls became very agitated, calling and diving incessantly. Ten pairs were estimated to be present.

Factors Affecting Status

Due to the island's remote location and the extreme difficulty of access, human interference is unlikely. Three full grown albatross chicks, presumably the previous season's young, were found dead on nest mounds; the cause was not determined. The island is apparently free of ticks.

OTHER VERTEBRATES

About 100 Australian Fur Seals *Arctocephalus pusillus* were ashore on sloping rocks of the east coast. Numbers may be greater during breeding. Two lizards, both *Pseudemoia palfreymani* were found.

Banding

Nil.

Bibliography

1. Fowler, S. (1947), 'A Landing on Pedra Branca', *Proc. Roy. zool. Soc. N.S.W.* 47: 22-26.
2. Serventy, D. L., V. N. Serventy and J. Warham (1971), The Handbook of Australian Sea-birds. A. H. and A. W. Reid, Sydney.
3. Sharland, M. (1947), 'The Gannet on Pedra Branca', *Tas. Nat.* I (2): 14.

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