SEABIRD ISLANDS No. 78

Mewstone, Tasmania

Location: 43° 44′ S., 146° 23′ E.; 22 km off the south coast of Tasmania and 12 km south-east of Maatsuyker Island.

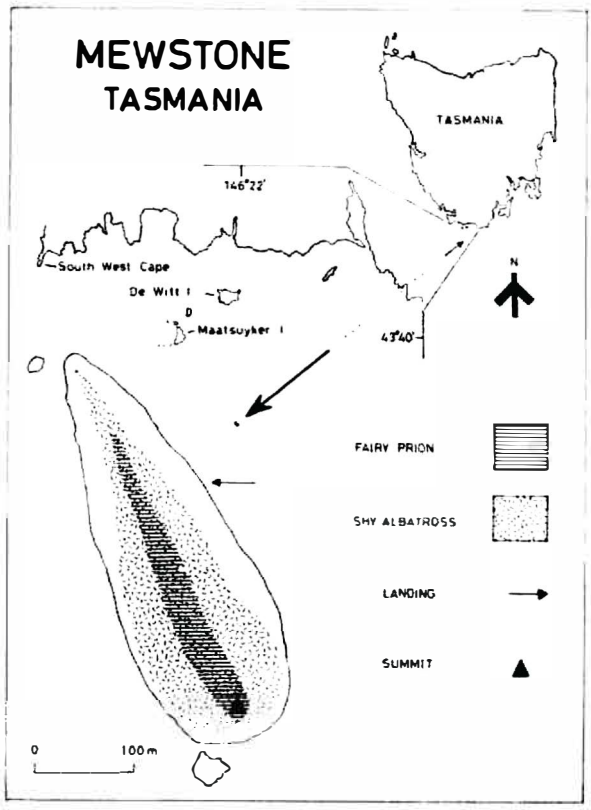
Status: Part of the South-west National Park administered by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (Tas.).

Description: 6.8 ha; 450 m long by 150 m wide with very steep to sheer cliff sides rising to a height of 133 m. A ridge starting from the summit at the south-eastern end, runs north-west and consists of loose boulders and numerous rock crevices. The eastern and western slopes meet along this ridge; the only flat area occurs right at the summit. The sloping sides of the ridge are stepped with level or gently sloping ledges.

Senecio leptocarpus, S. lautus, Carpobrotus rossii, Poa poiformis, Asplenium obtusatum, Chenopodium glaucum, Salicornia quinqueflora were the only species of plants found. Plants grew only in crevices or cavities where soil had accumulated.

Landing: Possible only in calm conditions which are rare occurrences in this area. Although the western side was not investigated for a suitable landing, the most suitable site is near the centre of the eastern side where the first five metres of sheer rock is broken by a small crevice. Here the almost constant sea swell has the least effect. Once ashore at this spot the summit can be gained with little difficulty.

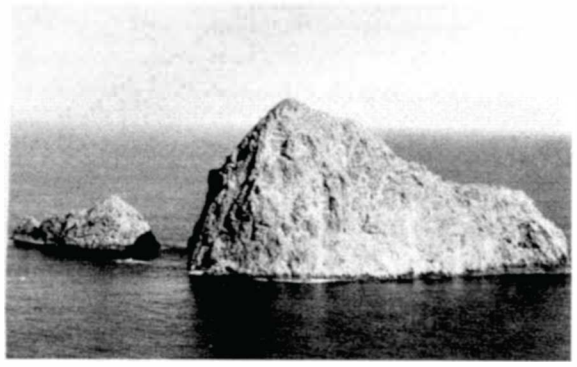
Ornithological History: Lord[3] did not land on the Mewstone but in 1927 stated that "This southern outpost is described in the Admiralty sailing directions as 'swarming with birds'. . . . That Albatrosses breed there we know." He also said that "fishermen state that two species of Albatross, as well as other kinds of sea-birds, also nest here." Other reports from boats have been recorded by Kurth[2] in July 1950 and R. Denne[1] in 1951, both indicating the presence of Shy Albatrosses breeding. Denne estimated 2 000 breeding pairs. The following information was obtained during a three hour visit by N. P. Brothers on 31 December 1977.



Breeding Seabirds and Status

Diomedea cauta Shy Albatross — Nests occurred on both sides of the island, some as low as 15 m above sea level, but most were at higher altitudes. The lowest nests on the western slope were higher than the lowest on the eastern slope, probably because of prevailing winds creating greater exposure to the sea and 10 m high cliffs along most of that shore. Nests on the eastern slopes appeared to occur as groups with a few isolated nests scattered between the groups. About 75 per cent of the nests on the east slope were located at the higher altitudes directly above the landing place.

Very few chicks were unattended and only three nests were found with birds still incubating



• *Mewstone, eastern side (looking south-west).*

Photo: J. England

an egg. A further two eggs were found abandoned in rock crevices. Many nests were empty, some attended by adult birds but others apparently abandoned. The breeding cycle appears to be similar to that reported by Johnstone *et al.*[2] with the birds probably laying in the latter part of September and young birds commencing to leave the island in early April. The most elaborate nest mounds were made from dirt and small pebbles with only traces of vegetation. Most nests were simply flat patches of dirt, the birds probably forgoing the construction of mounds due to lack of suitable material. When approached, adult birds with chicks or eggs appeared undismayed whereas non-breeding birds often departed.

Estimating numbers of breeding pairs was complicated by the many non-breeding birds present either singly or in pairs, scattered throughout the colony. Moreover most chicks had recently hatched and were still being incubated by a parent, often with the other parent sitting nearby. At the southern end of the island nests were located on the many rock ledges available. Some 66 per cent of the breeding pairs occupied the western slope. Estimated 1 500 to 2 000 breeding pairs.

Pachyptila turtur Fairy Prion — Nests of this species were found under boulders and in rock crevices, some often completely exposed. Suitable breeding sites occurred only along the top of the ridge. No nests were found in any other locality. Often several nests were located in one crevice while others were unused although apparently suitable. With one exception, all nests found contained small downy chicks. One nest on the summit contained a very small chick and an adult bird. Several abandoned eggs were found in crevices. Probably present to breed from late in August, eggs being laid early in November and the young leaving by the end of February. Estimated 300 breeding pairs.

Factors Affecting Status

Lord[4] recounted stories that albatross eggs were taken for sale to egg collectors but probably no human interference occurs nowadays. Five adult albatrosses were found dead, wedged in gaps between boulders and in crevices. On Albatross Island, Johnstone *et al.*[2] reported chick mortality from heavy tick infestations. Despite an intensive search no ticks were found on the Mewstone, either on birds or in nest material.

OTHER VERTEBRATES

The Australian Fur Seal *Arctocephalus pusillus* occurs in small groups but no more than 50 individuals were seen. The skink *Leiolopisma pretiosa* is abundant.

Other Seabirds Recorded

Pelecanoides urinatrix	Common Diving-Petrel
Leucocarbo fuscescens	Black-faced Shag
Larus novaehollandiae	Silver Gull

Banding

Nil.

Bibliography

1. Green, R. H. and B. C. Mollison (1961), 'Birds of Port Davey and South Coast of Tasmania', *Emu* 61: 223-236.
2. Johnstone, G. W., D. Milledge and D. F. Dorward (1975), 'The White-capped Albatross of Albatross Island: Numbers and Breeding Behaviour', *Emu* 75: 1-11.
3. Kurth, D. E. (1951), 'The Mewstone Rockery of the White-capped Albatross', *Emu* 51: 76-77.
4. Lord, C. (1927), 'Southern Outposts', *Emu* 27: 16-19.

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