

SEABIRD ISLANDS

No. 97

South Channel Island, Victoria

Location: 38°18'S., 145°48'E.; in Port Phillip Bay, 6 km NE of Point King and 4 km SE of Mud Islands, Victoria.

Status: Controlled by the Commonwealth Government (Department of Defence) and leased to the Department of Ports and Harbours (Victoria) as an explosives store, and to the Bureau of Meteorology. Access is restricted, and permission to land is required.

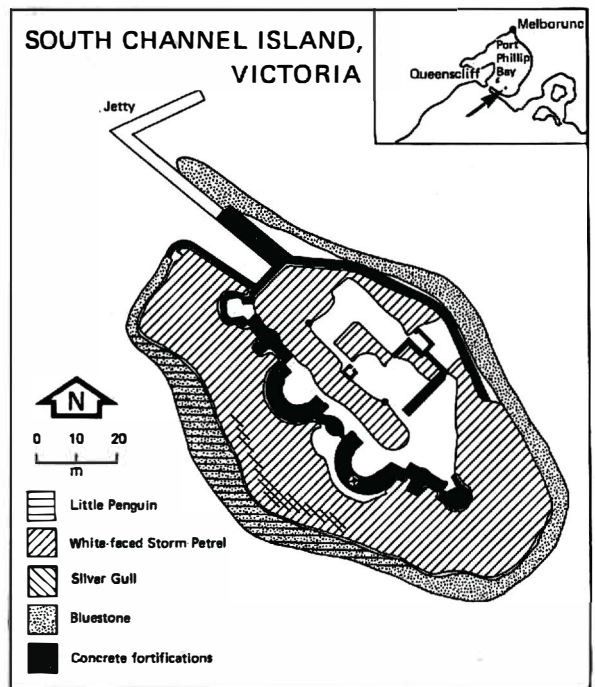
Other Name: Fort Island.

Description: 0.5 ha; man-made island constructed in 1879-80 for defence fortifications by the dumping of some 14 000 tonnes of bluestone on a sandbank⁴.

It is approximately oval in shape, about 130 m long by 75 m wide having a maximum height of about 8 m. Except for the old concrete fortifications the island is covered with sandy soil which supports a shrub flora of *Atriplex cinerea*, *Rhagodia baccata* and *Tetragonia implexicoma*, with occasional *Coprosma repens*. Grasses include *Sagurus ovatus*, *Bromus diandrus* and *Stenotaphrum secundatum*.

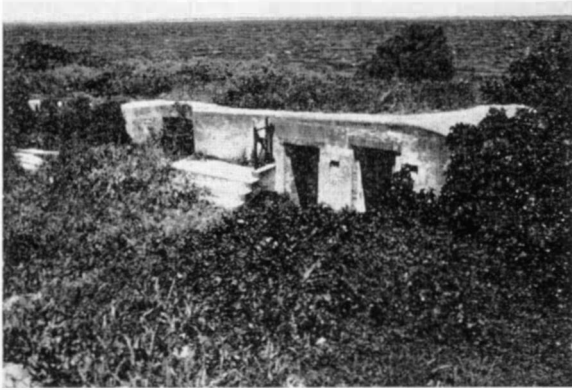
Landing: Via old jetty, or onto rocks.

Ornithological History: The first ornithological record from the island is that of storm-petrels breeding there in 1932 when there was a 'well-established' colony². Tarr³ reported a colony of



at least 2 000 birds in 1947, and by 1960 the storm-petrels were almost fully utilizing the island for breeding³. In 1964, Wheeler⁴ estimated 2 000 burrows.

We visited the island for three hours on 10 November 1978, and it was revisited on 21 June 1979 for about 1.5 hours.



• South Channel Island showing part of a gun emplacement (looking south-west).



• Part of the storm-petrel colony (looking south-east).

Breeding Seabirds and Status

Eudyptula minor Little Penguin — some 30-40 pairs breed on the island (D. Venn, Fisheries and Wildlife Division, pers. comm.) and we found one dead bird in a gun pit.

Pelagodroma marina White-faced Storm-Petrel. The species occupied an area estimated to be 3 300 m². The mean burrow density in 40 quadrats of 3.14 m² was 2.05/m² and the population number of burrows on the island was estimated as 6 800 (95% confidence interval 6 000-7 600). The number of burrows seems to have increased considerably; Wheeler⁴ estimated only one burrow per sq. yd. (1.20/m²) in an occupied area of 2 400 square yards (2 006 m²) in 1964, but there is now little unused soil for more pairs to burrow in.

Larus novaehollandiae Silver Gull — We found seven nests, two with 2 eggs and two with 2 young (10 November 1978).

Factors Affecting Status

The island is well vegetated but the soil in which the storm-petrels burrow collapses easily. Many people visit the island and, as they are unaware of the existence of the storm-petrel colony, must cause considerable damage by collapsing the burrows. Many birds perish by falling into the gun pits from which they are unable to escape^{1,2,3,4}. There are no avian or mammalian predators recorded for the island.

Other Seabirds Recorded

Puffinus tenuirostris Short-tailed Shearwater (one dead in gun emplacement).
Sterna bergii Crested Tern

Banding

Period January 1960 to June 1978.

Pelagodroma marina — 15 adults, 237 nestlings; one recovered 25 km WNW of the island; 6 birds banded at Mud Islands found dead on South Channel Island.

Bibliography

1. Dickinson, D. J. (1951), 'Death traps on Fort Island', *Vic. Nat.* 67:170.
2. Gillham, M. E. and J. A. Thomson (1961), 'Old and new storm petrel rookeries in Port Phillip Bay', *Proc. R. Soc. Vict.* 74:37-46.
3. Tarr, H. E. (1948), in 'Nature Notes', *Bird Observer's Club Monthly Notes*. January 1948.
4. Wheeler, R. (1964), 'South Channel Fort Island', *VORG Notes* 1:1-2.

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