

SEABIRD ISLANDS

No. 84

Cliffy Island, Seal Islands Group, Victoria

Location: 38°57'S., 146°42'; 22 km east of Wilsons Promontory, Vic.

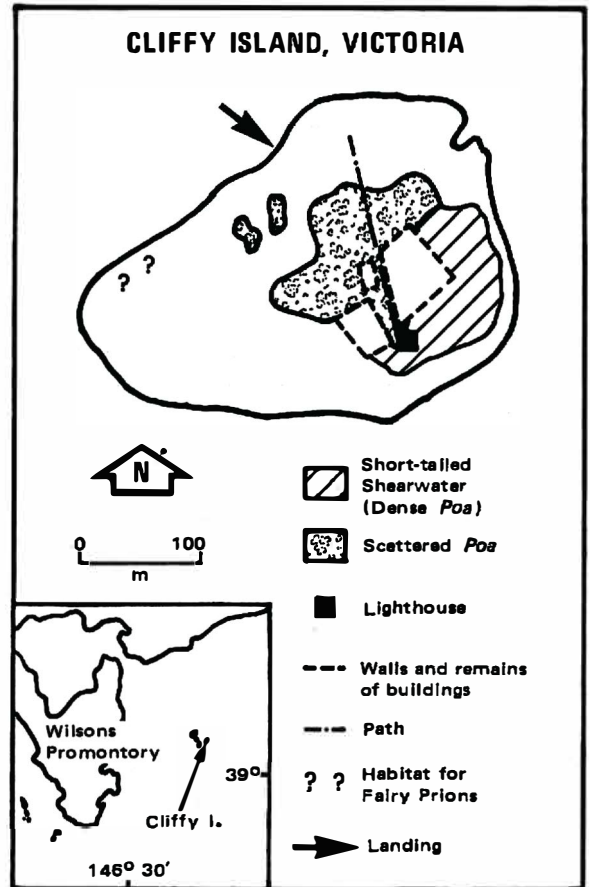
Status: Controlled by the Commonwealth Department of Transport.

Description: 8 ha; a granite island, some 370 m long by 260 m wide and rising to 43 m. The southern and eastern sides have cliffs of 30 m but elsewhere the granite slopes down to the sea. The lighthouse was manned from 1884³ until November 1971, when an automatic beacon was installed. The vegetation is rather sparse and was described in detail by M. E. Gillham², and G. S. Hope and G. K. Thomson⁵. A small, fairly pure community of *Poa poiiformis* tussock occurs on the summit and in patches elsewhere. Other communities are of *Disphyma australe*, *Salicornia quinqueflora*, *Senecio lautus* — *Asplenium obtusatum*, *Plantago coronopus* — *Poa poiiformis*, and rock surfaces with open lichen colonies⁵.

The island is rocky and soil depth suitable for burrowing shearwaters is restricted mainly to the *Poa* areas.

Landing: Onto rocks on the north-western side; difficult or impossible in rough weather.

Ornithological History: In 1886 F. Dunk, the lighthouse keeper on the island, forwarded a Common Diving-Petrel and eggs to A. J. Campbell¹. In 1938 A. H. E. Mattingley⁶ made mention of a brief visit to Cliffy Island during a trip to the Hogan Group; he gave few details but noted that the Seal Group "supports the usual common forms of sea-birds such as Gulls, Shearwaters, Penguins, Terns and a few land forms." In 1959 Gillham³ recorded a colony of not more than 100 Short-tailed Shearwaters, and about 100 pairs of Silver Gulls nesting on the northern slopes. She failed to find "the small population of fairy prions, reported by the Victorian Bird Observers Club"³. We spent about 1.5 hours on the island on 21 December 1978 and found only shearwaters and gulls nesting.



Breeding Seabirds and Status

Eudyptula minor Little Penguin — Serventy *et al.*⁷ included this island as a breeding station of the Little Penguin, probably on the report by Gillham³ who noted that "Scattered mutton birds and penguins occur in crevices of the main *Disphyma* zone . . .". There is no subsequent record and none was found by us in December 1978.



• *Clifty Island (looking south).*

Puffinus tenuirostris Short-tailed Shearwater — We found most burrows in the dense *Poa* area (0.9 ha) east of the lighthouse; here the mean burrow density in twenty 20 m² quadrats was 0.61/m² which gave an estimate of 5 300 burrows (95% confidence interval 3 800-6 700). A further 508 burrows were counted in about half the remaining *Poa* area, and the total population for the island was estimated at 6 300 burrows.

There has been a considerable increase in numbers since Gillham's visit in 1953³. A small colony was recorded in 1967,⁵ and the evacuation of the island by lighthouse staff, and their animals, in 1971 may have allowed the species to flourish.

Pelecanoides urinatrix Common Diving-Petrel — In August 1886, Campbell¹ received "a series of eggs, together with a bird" from Dunk. The diving-petrels apparently came ashore during June and July "to scrape out and prepare their nest-burrows". According to Dunk, eggs were laid about the end of July. There have been no subsequent records.

Larus novaehollandiae Silver Gull — In 1959 Gillham³ reported 100 pairs, but only one pair with young was seen during our visit.

Factors Affecting Status

Factors involved in the disappearance of the penguin population are not known. The decline in the Silver Gull population might be due to the absence of humans and their refuse since 1971; the removal of dogs and cats then has probably allowed the shearwater population to increase substantially. Undoubtedly the dogs and cats would have interfered with any prions and diving-petrels attempting to breed; there now seems little to prevent these species from recolonising the island.



• *North-western corner — possible Fairy Prion habitat.*

Other Seabirds Recorded

| | |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Leucocarbo fuscescens</i> | Black-faced Shag |
| <i>Cereopsis novaehollandiae</i> | Cape Barren Goose — not recorded by Dorward ² , but we saw 12. |
| <i>Haematopus fuliginosus</i> | Sooty Oystercatcher |

Banding

Nil.

Bibliography

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5. Hope, G. S. and G. K. Thomson (1971), 'The vegetation of Clifty Island, Victoria, Australia', *Proc. R. Soc. Vict.* 84:121-127.
6. Mattingley, A. H. E. (1938), 'Birds of the Hogans and other islands of Bass Strait', *Emu* 38:7-11.
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