

SEABIRD ISLANDS

No. 86

Rabbit Island, Wilsons Promontory, Victoria

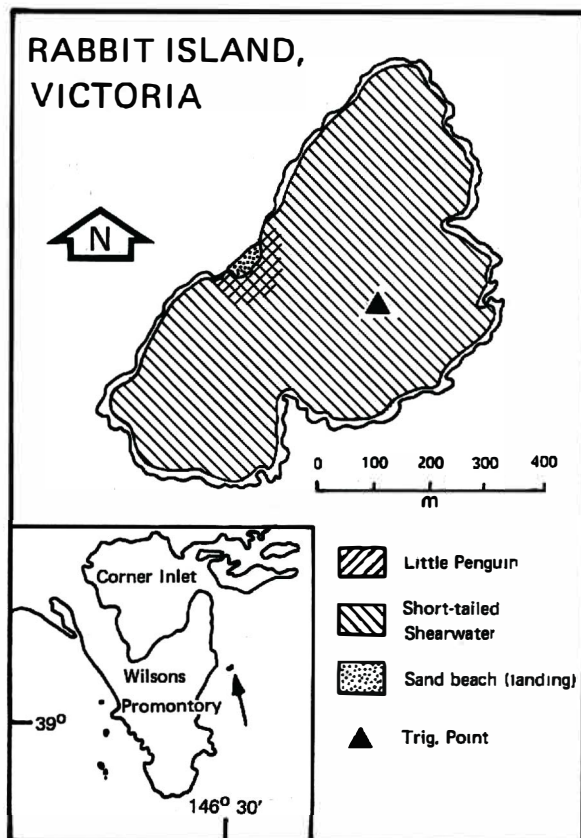
Location: 38°54'S., 146°31'E., on the north-eastern side of Wilsons Promontory, Victoria, 1.6 km from the nearest mainland.

Status: Included in the Wilsons Promontory National Park and controlled by the National Parks Service (Vic.); camping is not allowed.

Description: About 30 ha; the granite island rises to about 59 m at the survey point on the summit; it is some 866 m long and 466 m at the widest point. On the western, less exposed, side the splash zone quickly succeeds to the *Poa poiiformis* community but on the eastern and southern coasts cliffs extend upwards. Most of the island is covered by *P. poiiformis* tussock which includes a variety of species, particularly *Senecio lautus* and *Carduus tenuiflorus*. Towards and around the summit, which is becoming densely vegetated following the eradication of rabbits, *Acacia longifolia* and *Leptospermum laevigatum* are the more dominant species but *Leucopogon parviflorus* and *Correa alba* are occasionally abundant; individuals of these species are also found around the island. The sand beach (on the central western coast) is backed by the densely vegetated area which includes *Atriplex cinerea*, *Rhagodia baccata* and *Tetragonia tetragonioides*. In turn this is replaced by a stand of *Pteridium esculentum* which extends up the slope towards the summit. Soil depth is generally adequate for burrowing species over most of the island. However, in previously eroded areas and around the summit, soil is usually shallow. Further details on the flora and recent history of the island are presented elsewhere^{2, 3, 5, 6, 7}.

Landing: Onto the sand beach in most winds, but westerlies may make landing onto rocks elsewhere necessary.

Ornithological History: Though frequently visited, by ships crews and others⁴, and by some early naturalists, the first published account of its bird-



life appears to be that of M. E. Gillham². F. I. Norman visited the island infrequently between 1965 and 1968⁶, and S. G. Lane and H. Battam visited on 6 November 1979. We were on the island again on 5 and 10 December 1978 and 10 December 1979.

Breeding Seabirds and Status

Eudyptula minor Fairy Penguin — Gillham considered that the island held 'many hundreds' of penguins in 1959, and our estimate of about 500



• Rabbit Island (looking east).



• Part of the southern end (looking northward).

burrows, mainly around the coast appears consistent with this estimate.

Puffinus tenuirostris Short-tailed Shearwater — In 1959 shearwater burrows numbered 'many thousands', though the birds were not then present in the eroded area² which, in 1965, occupied some 6.5 ha. Eradication of the rabbits in late 1968 led to plants recolonising this area, and subsequently the shearwaters began nesting in it. By 1978 there was little evidence of the erosion, though burrow densities varied. Extrapolation of burrow densities and area suggested an island burrow total of about 131 000⁷.

Cereopsis novaehollandiae Cape Barren Goose — Gillham² did not record this species, nor did Dorward¹ and none was seen there between 1965 and 1968. However, adults and young were present in 1978 and November 1979. In December 1979, 18 birds, including young, were counted and a dead gosling and an old nest found.

Haematopus fuliginosus Sooty Oystercatcher — Seen on visits between 1965 and 1968; in 1978 and in 1979 three nests were found.

Larus novaehollandiae Silver Gull — About 100 pairs were breeding on the northern end and one pair near the beach in December 1979.

Larus pacificus Pacific Gull — Frequently seen around the island and five nests were found in 1979.

Factors Affecting Status

Short-tailed Shearwaters have been harvested on Rabbit Island in the past, and the practice doubtless continues. Previously, the eroded area limited burrow distribution.

OTHER VERTEBRATES

Rabbit *Oryctolagus cuniculus* (eradicated 1968).

Other Seabirds Recorded

<i>Leucocarbo fuscescens</i>	Black-faced Shag
<i>Sterna bergii</i>	Crested Tern

Banding

E. minor — 11 nestlings (10 Dec. 79).
P. tenuirostris — 5 "adults" (6 Nov. 79).
C. novaehollandiae — 1 runner (6 Nov. 79).

Bibliography

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