

SEABIRD ISLANDS

No. 109

Coffin Island, Western Australia

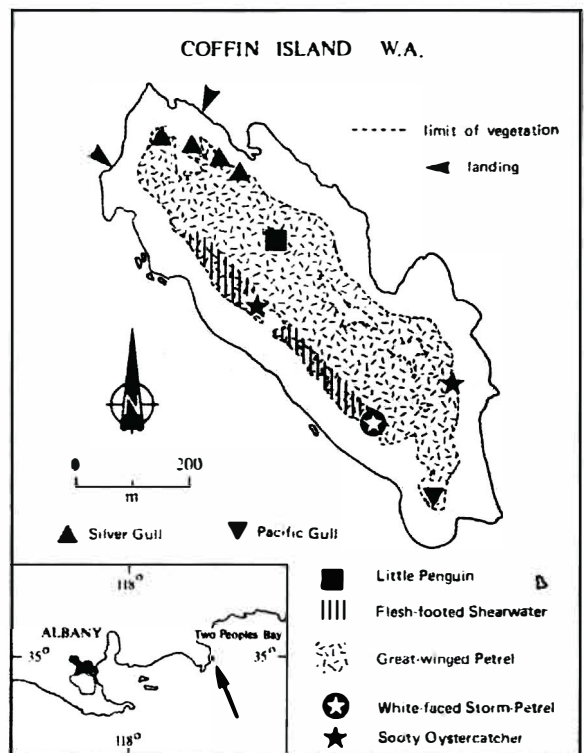
Location: 35°00'S., 118°12'E.; 250 m from the mainland, near Two People Bay, 30 km east of Albany, W.A.

Status: Class A reserve, part of the reserve set aside for the Noisy Scrub-bird. Permit to enter required.

Description: 28 ha; 1.0 km long by 0.3 km at the widest and rising to 45 m in height, the island is a small, flat-topped ridge of adamellite running NW-SE and is surrounded by steeply-sloping rock faces, except for a boulder beach on the south-western corner of the north-western end and a gently sloping rock shelf on the south-eastern corner of the south-eastern end. The top of the island is flat and gently sloping upwards from both ends, with the summit about 800 m from the north-western end. It has light sandy soil that may be 60-100 cm deep in the middle of the island.

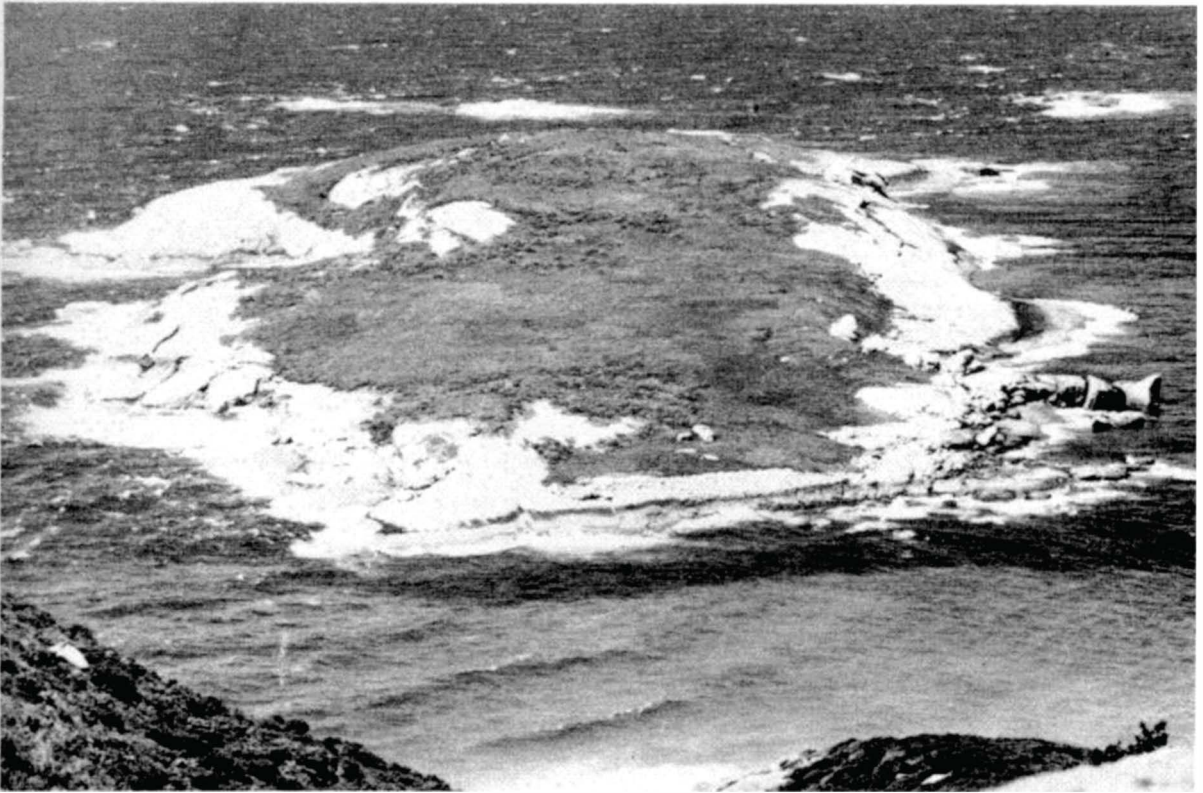
The vegetation is dominated by a dense cover of *Rhagodia radiata* which forms a tangled growth about one metre tall. Between the *Rhagodia* and the rocky coast there is a thin zone, some two to five metres wide, of mainly prostrate plants, grasses and sedges, of which *Carpobrotus virescens* is the dominant. On the south-eastern end of the island *C. virescens* forms a zone of about 30 m wide. It is also found in patches within the *Rhagodia* where the burrowing birds have killed the *Rhagodia*. Of the five other shrubs on the island only *Anthocercis viscosa* (1-3 m) is in any numbers, scattered as single shrubs or small groups around the island, but mostly around three outcrops on the north-eastern side of the island.

Landing: The constant heavy swell and the steep rock slopes around the island make landing difficult. The safest landing place, depending on



the swell, is on the boulder beach on the south-western side of the north-western end of the island, or onto a rock shelf on the north-eastern corner of the north-western end of the island.

Ornithological History: The first account of the island is that of A. Collie who visited it on 4 June 1831¹. He recorded that during his stay sealers collected about 500 Great-winged Petrels. He also mentioned penguins but did not record if he saw any. No other birds were mentioned. Recent visits to the island have been those of



• *Coffin Island (looking south-east).*

Photo: G. S. Chapman

G. T. Smith and R. Sokolowski² on 1 May 1976, I. Abbott on 27 May 1976, N. Kolichis on 4 July 1978, N. Kolichis and T. Allen on 20 November 1978, and G. T. Smith and N. Kolichis on 14 January 1979². All these visits lasted about two to three hours and the data in this article are based mainly on these visits.

The maximum number of burrows suitable for Great-winged Petrels, Flesh-footed Shearwaters or Little Penguins was estimated at 14 000. The density was greatest in the larger patches of *Carpobrotus* ($0.5/m^2$) while under the *Rhagodia* it varied from $0.5/m^2$ to $0.1/m^2$. There were more burrows on the south-western half of the island. Most of the burrows are probably those of the Great-winged Petrel, as only about 30 active burrows were seen on 14 January 1979 when the Flesh-footed Shearwaters were on eggs, and only one Little Penguin burrow was found on 20 November 1978. Three

burrows attributed to White-faced Storm-Petrels were found on 14 January 1979.

Breeding Seabirds and Status

Eudyptula minor Little Penguin — One nest with two downy young was found on 20 November 1978. Only two dead birds have been found and it would appear that the breeding population is small.

Pterodroma macroptera Great-winged Petrel — On 1 May 1976 five pairs and a single bird were found, two of the pairs were in scrapes under *Rhagodia*, the others were in burrows. Fifty per cent of all burrows examined showed some signs of being used. Many probably had birds in them, judging from the number of calls given while walking through the colony. In April and May 2 000 to 3 000 birds, probably of this species, have been seen around and over the island at

dusk. On 4 July 1978 all the birds found were on a heavily-incubated egg, in scrapes under *Rhagodia* or in burrows 30-60 cm in length. Most of the burrows were in the median area of the island with numbers decreasing towards either side, especially on the north-eastern side. Only one large young was found on 20 November 1978.

Puffinus carneipes Flesh-footed Shearwater — Two chicks, probably of this species, were found by R. Sokolowski on 1 May 1976. Six birds each on a partly incubated egg were found on 14 January 1979. All the nests were on the south-western side of the island.

Pelagodroma marina White-faced Storm-Petrel — The wings of an adult and the carcass of a downy young were found on 14 January 1979. The three burrows that were dug out were empty.

Haematopus fuliginosus Sooty Oystercatcher — Two nests with eggs were found next to outcrops on the edge of the vegetation on 20 November 1978 (see map).

Larus novaehollandiae Silver Gull — Frequently seen roosting on the island with Crested Terns. Four nests with eggs were found at the north-eastern end on 20 November 1978 when 40 birds were counted. Three runners were found on 14 January 1978.

Larus pacificus Pacific Gull — One pair seen on the island during each of the trips; a nest with a partly incubated egg was found on 20 November 1978.

Factors Affecting Status

King's Skink *Egernia kingii* is common and undoubtedly preys on the eggs and chicks of all species nesting on the island. Sea-lions *Neophoca cinerea* and Fur Seals *Arctocephalus forsteri* occasionally move through the *Rhagodia* and may cause some minor losses of eggs and young chicks. On 4 July 1978 many of the burrows on the lower, north-western end of the island were waterlogged and had addled eggs. This factor probably only affects the Great-winged Petrels, which may suffer significant losses in wetter winters.

The difficulty of landing, its remote location and uninteresting appearance probably deter most potential visitors.

Other Seabirds Recorded

<i>Puffinus assimilis</i>	Little Shearwater
<i>Sterna bergii</i>	Crested Tern

Banding

Nil.

Acknowledgements

The Department of Fisheries and Wildlife (W.A.) supplied transport for the May 1976 trip and Mr T. Allen kindly took us to the island for the other visits. Dr N. Marchant identified the plants.

Bibliography

1. Collie, A. (1833), Account of an excursion to the north of King George's Sound, between 26th of April and the 4th of May, 1831. In Journals of several expeditions made in Western Australia during the years 1829, 1830, 1831 and 1832. J. Cross: London.
2. Smith, G. T. and N. Kolichis (1980), 'The flora and fauna of Coffin Island', *West. Aust. Nat.* 14: 225-228.
3. Sokolowski, R. (1976), 'Flora and fauna survey — Coffin Island', *State Wildlife Authority News Service* 6(2): 35.

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