

SEABIRD ISLANDS

No. 129

Ashmore Banks, Great Barrier Reef, Queensland

Location: 11°53'S., 143°38'E.; 38 km east-north-east from Cape Grenville, Qld.

Status: Vacant Crown Land; Fauna Sanctuary.

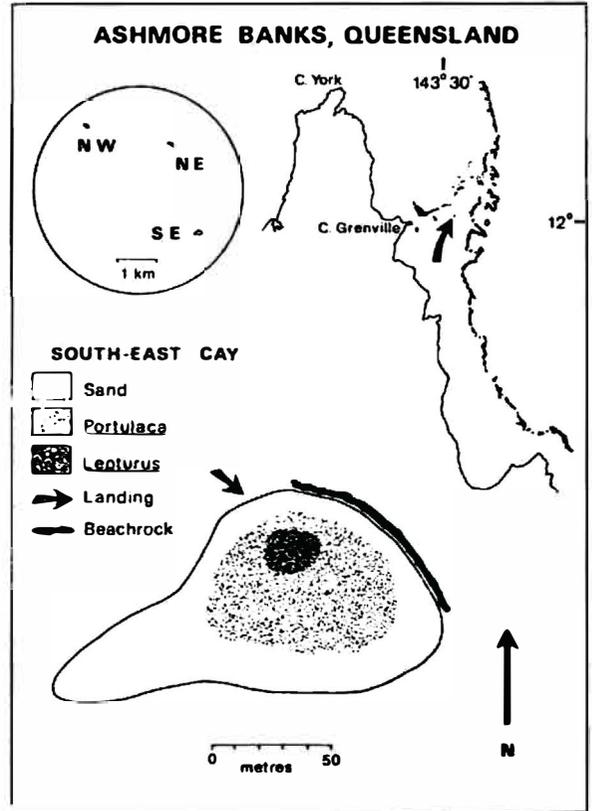
Other Names: Ashmore Sand-banks Nos. 1, 2 and 3². For convenience, the names North-west (NW) Cay (No. 1), North-east (NE) Cay (No. 2) and South-east (SE) Cay (No. 3) have been adopted in this paper.

Description: Ashmore Banks contains three cays, each on a separate coral reef. NW Cay, the smallest, is a small, unvegetated sandbank, composed of coral sand and rubble with no visible beachrock; it is almost covered by high tides. No seabird breeding has been recorded.

NE Cay, another small, unvegetated sandbank, is similar to but slightly larger than NW Cay; it has some intertidal beachrock. In 1981 this cay was exposed at high tide. Breeding seabirds have been recorded.

SE Cay, the largest of the three, is composed of coral sand and rubble; intertidal beachrock is present around part of the shore. Large numbers of coralline boulders, some up to 2.5 m high, surround the cay and lie scattered over the reef flat. About 1 ha, it is some 160 m long by 90 m wide and 2.5 m above High Water Mark at the highest point. The vegetated area contains two species, each in its own area. The highest part is covered by a small patch of the tussock grass *Lepturus repens*. Surrounding this is an area with a sparse, patchy cover of the herb *Portulaca oleracea*. The *Lepturus* grass does not exceed 0.5 m in height and is used almost exclusively by nesting noddies.

Landing: Onto the north-western beaches of all three cays, in the lee of their reefs. Local knowledge of this isolated area and its reefs is necessary. Landings could prove difficult in rough weather because of the exposed locality and poor anchorages.



Ornithological History: W. MacGillivray and E. H. Dobbyn visited the No. 3 Bank (SE Cay) on 27-29 October 1910 and recorded a large number of Brown Boobies with about 50 nests, and some Silver Gulls². MacGillivray returned to No. 3 Bank with W. McLennan on 3 December 1913 and recorded large numbers of nesting Brown Boobies and Crested Terns³. C. J. Limpus visited the NW Cay on 2 December 1976, but observed no nesting seabirds. He also flew over the Ashmore Banks on 8 April 1980, to check seabird and turtle breeding. On 8 June 1980, a group with D. H. C. Scton observed the NE Cay from

a boat, and landed on the NW Cay (0.5 hours) and SE Cay (2.5 hours). The SE Cay was mapped and vegetation surveyed. Seabirds were observed on each day. B. R. King landed on SE Cay on the afternoon and night of 6 June 1981. The cay was mapped, vegetation surveyed, seabird counts made and birds banded. The NE and NW Cays were observed from a boat for about 0.25 hours each on the morning of 7 June 1981. Further observations of all three cays were made on 13 July 1982 from a boat.

Breeding Seabirds and Status

Sula leucogaster Brown Booby — Breeds in small numbers on NE Cay (5 nests in both June 1981 and July 1982) and on SE Cay where up to about 200 nests have been recorded (164 nests in June 1980 and 197 nests in June 1981). In 1980 the nests contained one or two eggs but no chicks; a number of almost fully feathered juveniles and about 600 adults were present. In 1981 nests contained eggs, and young at all stages to large chicks; some juveniles were seen and about 500 adults were present at night. Nests were scattered over the whole surface of the cay but few were built in the *Lepturus* grass patch.

Sterna anaethetus Bridled Tern — One nest, on the ground in the *Lepturus* grass patch, contained a large chick in June 1981 (SE Cay).

Sterna bergii Crested Tern — Recorded nesting on No. 3 Bank (SE Cay) in December 1913³.

Anous stolidus Common Noddy — Up to 298 nests have been recorded in the small area of *Lepturus* grass on the SE Cay. The nests are placed on the clumps of vegetation.

Factors Affecting Status

Because of their small size, the three cays do not constitute a major seabird rockery compared with other outer barrier cays in the vicinity such as Raine Island, Pandora Cay or Sandbank No. 8. Inundation by high tides would limit breeding on NW and NE Cays. Green Turtles *Chelonia mydas* nesting would have an adverse effect on ground-nesting seabirds. Human visitation, with consequent disturbance is presumed to be slight. Predation of unattended eggs and chicks is carried out by Silver Gulls. Sand cays are liable to be greatly affected by wind, current or wave



• Part of the SE Cay. A Brown Booby chick is in *Lepturus* grass in the foreground; in the background Brown Boobies are nesting among the *Portulaca*.

action, resulting in the erosion or accretion of sand; this can cause changes in size, shape and the cay's position on its reef, with consequent effects on the distribution and abundance of vegetation and of nesting or roosting seabirds.

Other Seabirds Recorded

Egretta sacra Eastern Reef Egret
Sterna sumatrana Black-raped Tern

Banding

Sula leucogaster — 20 adults, 21 chicks (June 1981); no recoveries reported.

Bibliography

1. Alexander, W. B. (1925), 'Seabirds of the Great Barrier Reef', *Great Barrier Reef Comm. Rep. No. 5*: 47-51.
2. MacGillivray, W. D. K. (1910). 'Along the Great Barrier Reef', *Emu* 10: 216-233.
3. MacGillivray, W. D. K. (1917), 'Ornithologists in North Queensland', Part I, *Emu* 17: 63-87.

Acknowledgements

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