

## REPORT ON A VISIT TO THE PELICAN ISLANDS IN THE COORONG

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Note: This account deals with a visit made on Thursday, September 5, 1935, by the authors, and it is considered that the information is worth placing on record.

The largest island of the group of Pelican Islands in the vicinity of Policeman's Point has a more varied topography than that of any other island thereabouts. Most of the outline is somewhat higher than the centre valley. Patches of a succulent weed commonly called ice-plant lend touches of vivid green. A quite considerable area is thickly covered with stinging nettles which have grown to a height of over two feet, showing no indication of trampling by Pelicans or other birds. Towards the other end of the island are a large number of bushes lightly covering a considerable area. A couple of small beaches and irregular cliffs along the shore complete the notable features.

The weather on the day of our visit was fair but mostly cloudy, with a fairly strong wind. The previous day had been stormy and showers had fallen during the few days immediately preceding our visit. This would tend to obliterate signs, but appearances definitely indicated that no fox was living on the island at that time or in the immediate past. There were some rabbits living on the island, but not in large numbers.

Close to where we landed were the remains of a dead Swan with most of its head missing. Groups of remains of dead Pelicans were lying among the large bushes. Some of these groups contained about thirty or forty dead Pelicans and were loosely connected with other groups. These remains were much decomposed, and gave the impression that all had perished at about the same time.

While the great majority of dead Pelicans were in scattered groups among the bushes, there were other groups near an isolated boxthorn, and others were found beside a dead tree on and under which were a number of deserted Comorants' nests, and some

single specimens lying here and there in the open.

Two independent counts indicated that the number of dead Pelicans on the island was approximately 470. Many of the remains of the dead Pelicans in the groups were in contact with others, though only odd ones appeared to be actually on top of others. In most cases the necks were at about right angles to the bodies, the bodies lying face down with wings folded and lying loosely out of contact with the bodies. Three or four were noticed lying on their backs and one with neck outstretched.

The positions of the groups of bodies did not suggest that the birds had been sheltering from a storm, particularly in the instance of the two groups near the boxthorn which were on opposite sides of the bush. They were, however, mostly consistent with sheltering from the morning and the afternoon sunshine.

There were clear indications of three main nesting sites of Pelicans, and one that appeared to have been used for many years by Pied Cormorants or similar nesting birds. A few nests were on stunted dead trees, and a few on the ground which appeared to have been added to for a considerable time. Two of the Pelican nesting sites showed no conclusive evidence of having been occupied this season. The third site had nearly a dozen broken egg-shells scattered around it. Not one was intact, although four nests had contained one or two sound eggs in each at the time of Messrs. Condon's and Brummitt's visit a fortnight previously. The majority of the broken eggs had jagged holes in their sides, exactly similar to the holes usually made in fowls' eggs by Crows. All indications pointed to the fact that the Pelicans had commenced nesting on this island this season and had laid a number of eggs, but had probably not hatched out any young ones, when a sudden disaster occurred, resulting in the birds lying in groups dead and the desertion of the eggs.

Two large Swans' nests by the shore each contained five eggs and appeared fresh

and in good condition, suggesting that their owners had escaped the disaster that overtook the Pelicans, though it is quite possible that they were established later. A third similar nest contained one egg, but had a rather neglected appearance as if deserted.

A Spur-winged Plover's nest on this island contained three eggs, one of which was in the process of hatching out. A large Hawk or Eagle, two noisy Spur-winged Plovers, two Pied Oyster-catchers, and six Silver Gulls were the only other indications of any present bird population on the island. We brought away the remains of nine dead Pelicans for expert examination. (Tests for poisons and other causes of death subsequently proved negative).

We visited two other islands near by, and found large numbers of Pelicans and other birds nesting. The first one had about three hundred and ninety Pelicans' nests, about ninety of which had been established since August 21, these new nests being on the sloping eastern side of the island. About 50 per cent. of the Pelicans' eggs on this island had hatched out. We estimated the number of adult Pelicans here at six hundred. About a dozen Cormorants' nests contained from one to four eggs each. Nineteen dead Pelican chicks were counted lying here and there among the nests. They appeared to have died quite recently. On the occasion of the visit by Messrs. Condon and Brummitt a fortnight previously two Tukari (fish) had been seen among the nests, but on this occasion about twenty mullet were noted besides many small mullet about three or four inches long.

Near the water's edge an adult Pelican was lying dead. It appeared to have been dead from 24 to 48 hours and was in good condition. We brought it away with us for the S.A. Museum.

Between this island and the largest island is another, on which a great number of Pelicans, which we estimated at one thousand five hundred, and about four hundred Pied Cormorants (*P. varius*) were seen. There were about three hundred and forty Pelicans' nests, mostly containing one or two eggs each, though there was a total of thirty-one young Pelican chicks hatched out. Thirty-seven Pied Cormorants' nests appeared of recent construc-

tion, seven of them containing from one to three eggs each. Forty-three Swans' nests also were counted, four containing six eggs each, ten containing five eggs each, and the remainder with less than five. A number of mullet and other small fish was seen among the Pelicans' nests on this island. Six young Swans, a few days old, were also there.

Close beside some bushes on this island were the remains of about ten dead Pelicans, in a similar state of decomposition to those on the larger island near by, but nests within a few yards were occupied.

We passed another island on which we did not land, and estimated the number of Pelicans there at about two hundred. This is the island on which Messrs. Condon and Brummitt counted forty-eight Pelicans' nests about a fortnight previously.

Close to one island we saw a flock of about sixty Teal, the only ducks we saw on the trip, and about ninety Swans were seen in the same vicinity.

A considerable variation in size was noted among the Pelicans, a few being conspicuously larger than the average. They were noticed to lower the rear portion of the pouch under the bill when giving vent to their deep, prolonged grunt or call. The legs and feet of all the adults were of a dark bluish-grey color. The young chicks when hatched were quite bare, of a pinkish flesh color, including the bill and feet, and their eyes were light brown in color, and open. The bill changes to yellow, and a few weeks later becomes a dark, sooty color with yellow tip, and about the same time the skin around the eyes becomes nearly black, and the iris changes to light grey. At about three weeks of age the bird has increased to about six times its original size, and is covered with white down.

The adult birds have yellow skin around the eyes, and their bills have lost the sooty black color of those of the young birds.

The nests of the Pelicans varied very considerably. The majority were merely slight depressions in the ground surrounded by a few pieces of weeds or dry sticks, while a few were much more substantial structures composed of dry sticks, weeds, bones, and a few feathers. A few were built up to a height of six or nine inches, or even more. A few eggs were lying about between the

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