

THE BRIDLED TERN BREEDING IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

by MARK BONNIN

The Baudin Rocks (or Godfrey Islands) lie approximately two miles off the coast of South Australia some six miles north of Robe. In years when Salmon are plentiful in surrounding waters Crested Terns (*Sterna bergii*) form a nesting colony on the most northern of the two islands.

1967 was such a year and on 4.1.68 a visit to the colony was made in the company of Dr. R. C. Angove and Mr. Dean Hay. Between 400 and 500 pairs of Crested Terns had either eggs or recently hatched young on high land towards the southern end of this island. On the northern side, and perhaps eighty paces from this colony, a pair of terns of a different species were behaving in a manner suggesting that they had a nest in the area. They persistently landed on the spur of a sandstone cliff face, some twenty feet high, and uttered an alarm call higher pitched than the harsh call of the Crested Tern but not "yapping" in character. When approached they swooped towards the intruder until he left the precincts of this point. After prolonged searching a two or three-day old mottled gray chick was found, well hidden in a depression in the sand by the dense foliage of a low overlying bush a few feet from the terns' landing point. After a few minutes the adult birds permitted close approach allowing several colour photographs to be taken with a 400 mm. telephoto lens.

Field Description

When flying, this pair, the only ones seen, were more graceful than the Crested Tern, which frequently passed them in flight, thereby allowing comparison in size. They were more slender birds, very slightly shorter, had narrower wings and a much deeper fork in the tail. The back was dark brownish-gray in colour, in contrast to the pale slate gray on the Crested Terns. The under surface was uniformly white except for the wing tips and a narrow strip around the entire edge of the wings which appeared to be black. The most striking feature of the bird, when at rest, was the wide white band below the black cap, extending from the white front over and well behind the eye, well seen in the photograph, page 24. These birds were thus,

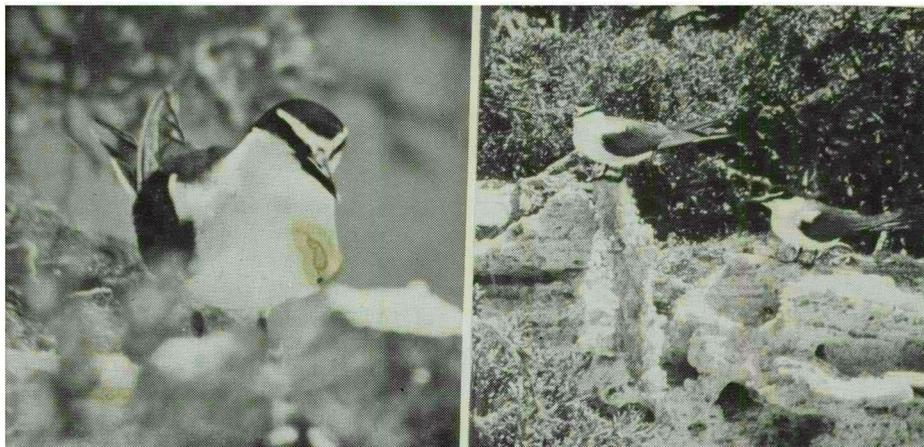
without doubt, Bridled Terns (*Sterna anaetheta*).

COMMENT

The Bridled Tern has not been reported from S.A. previously. The Sooty Tern (*Sterna fuscata*) is the only other species which could be confused with this bird. However, it is bigger, the back is almost black and the white frontal marking does not extend behind the eye. A specimen was found at Brighton in 1937. Inspection of skins in the S.A. Museum left no doubt that the pair seen on Baudin Rocks were Bridled Terns. Neither Terrill and Rix (1950) nor Condon (1962) recorded the Bridled Tern in S.A. Likewise Morgan (1922) and Brummitt (1934) in their respective accounts of the birds on Baudin Rocks did not record either the Sooty or the Bridled Terns. In Victoria sight records have been made of the Sooty Tern but not of the Bridled Tern (Wheeler 1967). It is interesting to note that A. J. Campbell (1907) recorded the presence of a solitary Sooty Tern on the Baudin Rocks in 1906. When seen only in flight these two species of tern are difficult to differentiate. In view of the now confirmed presence of a breeding pair of Bridled Terns it is possible that the bird seen by Campbell was a Bridled Tern. These birds seldom frequent the mainland, their habitat being islands off the coast. This habit greatly reduces the likelihood of them being seen by bird observers. Thus it is possible that the species has been breeding in the area in small numbers, unobserved, at least since 1906. It is inconceivable that their range could have gradually extended from Queensland around the coasts of N.S.W. and Victoria without notice. The only other possibility is a recent spread across the Great Australian Bight from W.A. Serventy and Whittell (1962) have commented that the birds were gradually extending their range southward and had been reported at Cape Leeuwin on the S.W. point of W.A. It is readily conceivable that an easterly migration along the islands of the sparsely inhabited south coast of W.A. to the S.E. of S.A. could have accrued without previous observation. *Continued on page 22*

BRIDLED TERN (Cont. from page 18)**REFERENCES**

- Brummitt, D. W., 'The Baudin Rocks,' *S. Aust. Ornith.* 12 (1934), 22.
- Campbell, A. J., *Emu*, 6 (1907), 138.
- Condon, H. T., 'A Handlist of the Birds of South Australia with Annotations,' *S. Aust. Ornith.*, 23 (1962), 85-150.
- Morgan, A. M., 'A Trip to the Baudin Rocks,' *Ibid* 6 (1922), 133.
- Serventy, D. L., and H. M. Whittell, *Birds of Western Australia*, Third Edition, 1962.
- Terrill, S. E., and C. E. Rix, 'The Birds of South Australia,' *S. Aust. Ornith.*, 19 (1950), 53-100.
- Wheeler, W. R., *A Handlist of the Birds of Victoria*, 1967.



BRIDLED TERNS (*Sterna anaetheta*). See page 18.

From colour transparencies by Mark Bonnin.