

NOTES ON THE BIRDS OF PEARSON ISLAND

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Accepted July, 1977

SUMMARY

Observations made on the birds of Pearson Island in February 1973 and February 1974 are here presented. Six, possibly seven, new records for the island are listed: Yellow-nosed Albatross, Australian Gannet, Osprey, Hooded Dotterel, Galah, Richard's Pipit and possibly White-browed (Spotted) Scrubwren. All but the last of these are presumably vagrants to the island.

In addition, the first report of the breeding of the Fairy Tern on Pearson Island is presented.

INTRODUCTION

Pearson Island is one of a group of islands known as the Investigator Group. It is situated in the eastern part of the Great Australian Bight approximately 70 km from the mainland.

I visited the Island from February 7-19, 1973, while B. Gepp and M. Gepp were staying there; and again from February 10-20, 1974, with P. Martinsen from the National Parks and Wildlife Service. The main purpose of the visits was to observe the habits of the Pearson Island Rock Wallaby *Petrogale penicillata pearsoni*. During these visits, notes were also made on the birds seen.

Previous visits to the island (when records of birds were made) took place in September (1914), November (1920), and January, (1923, 1960 and 1969). Paton (1971) collated the earlier records and supplemented them with her own observations during the 1969 expedition, giving the approximate numbers of each species recorded. Some of the species she mentions were not seen during these latest visits, but several additional species were recorded. These are probably due to the different time of the year for these visits, compared to the earlier expeditions.

SPECIES NOTES

LITTLE PENGUIN *Eudyptula minor*

Recorded on both visits. This is probably the most populous bird on the island. Though no attempt was made to estimate its numbers, it would not be unreasonable to call it abundant. It was found in burrows on all three sections. Paton (1971) found it up to 150 m above sea level on the North Section. Although it was frequently seen and heard through the night, there were never many tracks on the sandy beach in the morning. On the other hand, the granite rocks bounding the beach were heavily used.

YELLOW-NOSED ALBATROSS

Diomedea chlororhynchos

Not previously recorded. During the 1974 visit, two of these albatrosses spent an afternoon swimming in the vicinity of two fishing boats anchored about 100 m offshore, in the small bay on the eastern side of the Middle Section. This species was also occasionally seen between Pearson Island and the mainland.

AUSTRALIAN GANNET *Morus serrator*

No previous records. An immature was regularly observed in 1974, fishing in the sheltered waters off the eastern side of the South and Middle Sections.

BLACK CORMORANT *Phalacrocorax carbo*

One seen in February 1974.

WHITE-FACED HERON

Ardea novaehollandiae

One seen in 1973; two in 1974.

REEF HERON *Egretta sacra*

Two seen in 1973; one only in 1974.

CAPE BARREN GOOSE

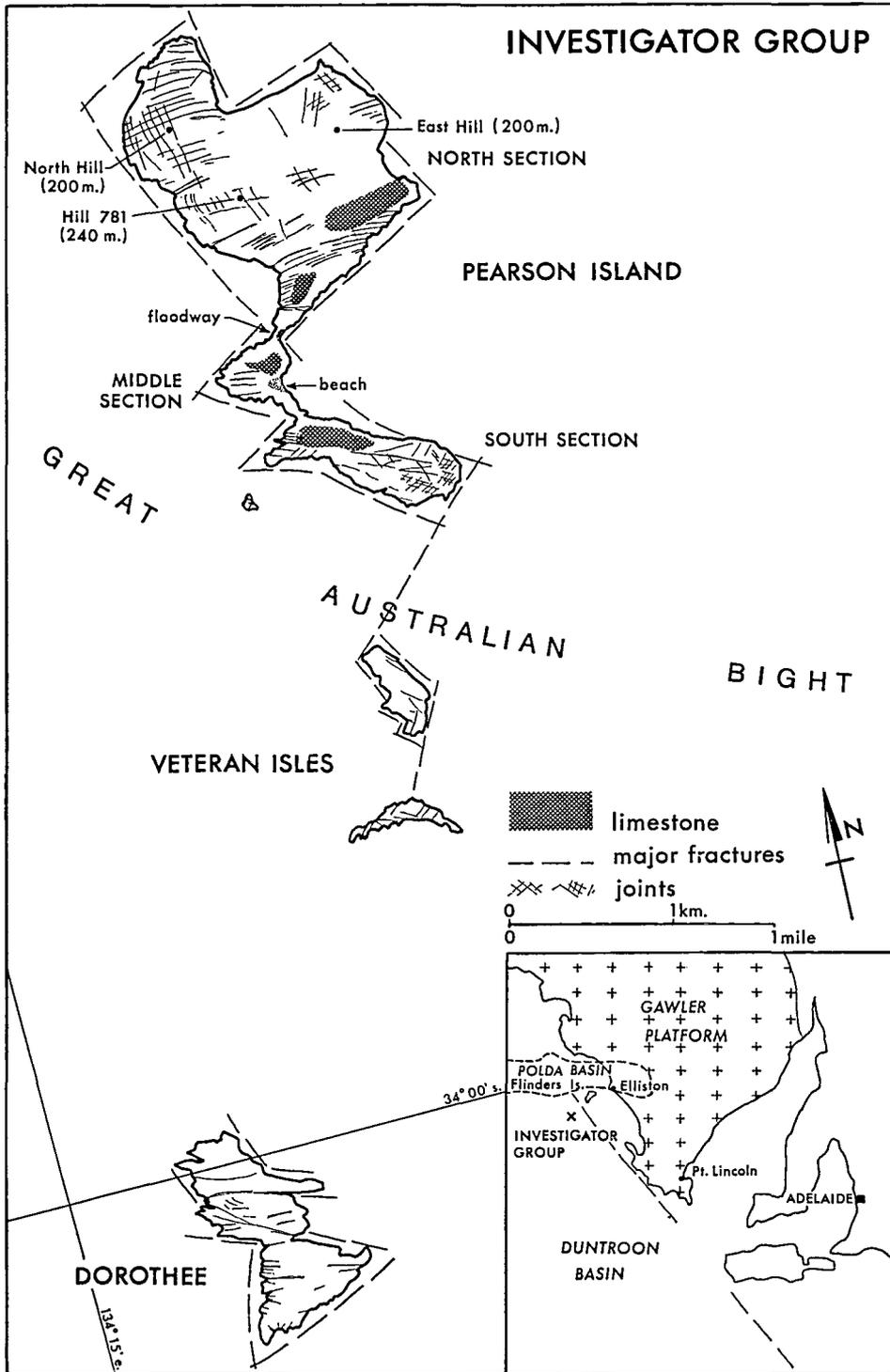
Cereopsis novaehollandiae

Six observed in 1973, and a total of 15 in 1974. On the latter visit they were regularly observed passing overhead, but they had a regular feeding patch on the saltbush-covered limestone plateau on the South Section. They would appear from the direction of the North Section most mornings and return in the evenings. Occasionally they would continue beyond the South Section, presumably to graze on Dorothee, an island about 4.5 km further south. (Paton (1971) records seeing them there.) Altogether 6 pairs and one pair with an immature were observed. One definite attraction on the South Section is the presence of a large natural freshwater reservoir. It is capable of retaining water for long periods, as the massive boulder covering the main depth acts as an effective insulator. On each visit, it held some 1000-1500 litres of water, at what is essentially a very dry time of the year.

WHITE-BREASTED SEA-EAGLE

Haliaeetus leucogaster

In 1973, a pair of adults and a large immature were noted, mainly on the North Section. In 1974, P. Martinsen (pers. comm.)



PEARSON ISLAND

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located an unoccupied nest on the North Section that contained a skull of the Pearson I. Rat *Rattus fuscipes*, and a second nest attended by two adults. Cleland (1948) reported considerable mortality of the introduced wallaby *Macropus eugenii* on Greenly I. in November 1947, and suggested that this was due to predation by the White-breasted Sea-Eagle, beneath a feeding-tree of which he found numerous wallaby remains. No remains of *Petrogale penicillata pearsoni* were found at the nest located by Martinsen (but see the remarks under Barn Owl below).

OSPREY *Pandion haliaetus*

No previous records. In February 1974, a bird was seen flying low along the eastern coastline from the North Section to the end of the South Section.

NANKEEN KESTREL *Falco cenchroides*

One noted in 1973. In 1974, one was occasionally seen hunting on the upper slopes of the Middle Section, and flying across to the North Section, where at least two kestrels had been observed.

SOOTY OYSTER-CATCHER

Haematopus fuliginosus

Noted on both visits. They were frequently seen in twos or threes on various intertidal parts of both the Middle and South Sections. The most seen at any one time were 7 birds, mainly because more than one group was visible simultaneously (although the groups could not see each other).

SPUR-WINGED PLOVER

Vanellus miles novaehollandiae

Three seen in 1973, always together. They were frequently on the edge of the beach, or standing in the shallows. They were the most wary birds encountered, and always the first to give alarm calls and to fly off, even when movements disturbing them occurred some distance away. In 1974 two were recorded.

HOODED DOTTEREL *Charadrius rubricollis*

No previous records. In February 1973, two were frequently seen feeding amongst the intertidal rocks on the western side of the isthmus between the Middle and South Sections.

TURNSTONE *Arenaria interpres*

In 1973, often seen feeding in the wave-zone, on the beach or among the rocks, usually in groups of five or six, occasionally up to 13. In 1974 a much larger group of 40 birds was seen resting during the afternoon on the rock slopes of the north side of the South Section.

RED-NECKED STINT *Calidris ruficollis*

SANDERLING *Calidris alba*

In January 1960 Thomas and Edmonds recorded a *Calidris*, either *C. ruficollis* or *C. alba* (Paton 1971). In 1973 we noted regularly a party of five *Calidris* feeding on the beach of the Middle Section; in 1974 a party of eight *Calidris* was seen daily on the same beach. We could not say certainly whether these were *C. ruficollis* or *C. alba*. In November 1976 Cox and Parker (Parker pers. comm.) recorded four *C. ruficollis* on this beach.

SILVER GULL *Larus novaehollandiae*

PACIFIC GULL *Larus pacificus*

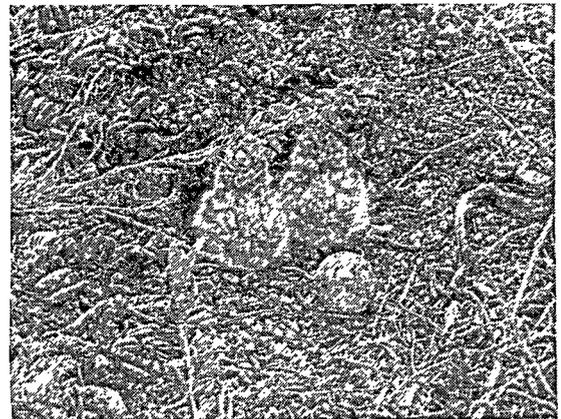
Small numbers of each were recorded on both visits, usually with groups of Crested Terns (see below).

CRESTED TERN *Sterna bergii*

Recorded on both visits. These were observed mainly during the hours of full sunlight, when they would spend a considerable time resting on the beach, at the edge of the water. They tended to appear there some time after day-break, and would remain (unless disturbed) until two or three hours before sunset, when they would begin fishing, fairly close to the shore. The maximum number recorded on any single occasion was 60 birds. Their appearance is noteworthy in the respect that they were either present as a substantial group or not at all.

FAIRY TERN *Sterna nereis*

No previous breeding records. In February 1974 two breeding colonies, each of about 30



Fairy Tern chicks on South Section of Pearson Island.

birds, were found on the limestone plateau of the South Section. All the eggs were hatching.

GALAH *Cacatua roseicapilla*

Not previously recorded. In 1973 it was seen twice. One pair was seen overhead, flying from the North Section of Pearson I. towards Dorothee I. On a later occasion, a large flock was observed travelling in the same direction. None of the birds was seen to settle on any part of the islands.

ROCK-PARROT *Neophema petrophila*

Recorded in both 1973 and 1974. Next to the Silvereye, this was the most commonly seen species, though their movements were so frequent as to give the impression that their numbers were much greater than in fact was the case. They were usually to be seen flying swiftly and low over the saltbush, into which they would suddenly alight and busily feed, before once again moving rapidly on. They were usually to be seen in pairs.

BARN OWL *Tyto alba*

Cleland (1923) wrote under Owl, "A large bird seen once at night and pellets found near the northern summit, suggest the presence of an owl." In the upper reaches of Main Creek (a gully running north-east on the eastern side of the North Section), a barn owl was seen in 1973 and 1974. In 1973 two dead juvenile wallabies *Petrogale penicillata pearsoni* were found nearby. One wallaby was freshly dead, and both had their throats torn out. Both were in the bed of Main Creek, where the overhanging trees might preclude the possibility of attack by a really large bird. Whether the wallabies were killed by the Barn Owl, Australian Ravens or a White-breasted Sea-Eagle (see above) or whether they died from other causes is a matter for conjecture.

The Barn Owl has been reported from several islands off the coast of Eyre Peninsula, probably mainly as a vagrant (Parker 1977).

WELCOME SWALLOW *Hirundo neoxena*

One individual was a regular visitor to the beach area during February 1973. It would rest for some minutes on a low rock on the downwind side of the beach. From this point, when rested, it would make its way upwind across the beach, at a height of less than a metre, frequently sweeping on insects on or slightly above the sand. Once it had reached the opposite side, it would return to the starting point and rest again. This cycle of behaviour would continue for hours at a time. A few were noted in 1974.

RICHARD'S PIPIT *Anthus novaeseelandiae*

Not previously recorded, though common on Flinders Island (Eckert 1970). In 1974 one bird was seen regularly on the limestone plateau of the Middle Section.

WHITE-BROWED SCRUBWREN

Sericornis frontalis

(includes the Spotted Scrubwren *S. maculatus*)

No previous records, though common on Flinders I. (Eckert *op. cit.*). On February 16, 1974, P. Martinsen tentatively identified a scrubwren of the *maculatus* group in thickets on the upper slopes of the North Section.

RED-CAPPED ROBIN

Petroica goodenovii

Several noted on the North Section in 1973 and 1974, amongst the *Casuarina stricta* trees on the upper slopes of Hill 781.

GOLDEN WHISTLER

Pachycephala pectoralis

Two were noted on the North Section in 1974, also in the *Casuarina stricta* trees.

SILVEREYE *Zosterops lateralis*

On the higher slopes of the Middle Section, the most commonly observed bird was the Silvereye, a bird also frequently encountered in small groups on the North and South Sections. Paton (1971) refers to them as seen in "flocks of about 20", whereas on this occasion they were usually to be seen in twos or threes, flying rapidly from one clump of shrubs to the next, or busily feeding in the foliage. Whilst they gave every appearance of belonging to small unified groups, they nevertheless moved singly from one clump of shrubs to the next, as though the second waited for the first to arrive safely before commencing its journey. Recorded on both visits.

HOUSE SPARROW *Passer domesticus*

Two birds were believed to have been seen in 1923, but none was noted in 1960. Paton (1971) reported that in January 1969, a flock of about 40 was present on the eastern point of the North Section of Pearson I., and that a few were seen on nearby Dorothee I. No House Sparrows were seen during the visits in 1973 and 1974. S. A. Parker and J. B. Cox, during a visit in late November 1976, recorded a few birds on the North Section of Pearson I. and two on Dorothee I. (Parker pers. comm.) Possibly the species is a vagrant from Flinders I. (where it is very common) that has so far failed to establish itself.

STARLING *Sturnus vulgaris*

On both visits, one or two birds were regularly seen on the Middle Section, but the numbers were much less than previously reported (Paton 1971), though this could well be due to the different location in which these observations were made.

Paton (1971) expressed concern at the presence of this species on Pearson I. However, in 50 years there seems to have been little increase in their numbers. This suggests that those observed were transients. On the other hand, those seen in February may represent the resident nucleus of a population that is much larger at other times of the year. Observations in other months are needed.

AUSTRALIAN RAVEN *Corvus coronoides*

On both visits, these were seen in varying numbers on all three sections. The largest number observed on one occasion was 14 (in 1973), but usually they were to be seen in much smaller groups. They were observed picking

at crabs and small fish stranded by the tide. On one occasion, a very sick-looking penguin was seen making its way across the rocks at midday. By 1500 hours it had had its throat torn out and was surrounded by ravens. It may have died before they arrived, or they may have killed it; but the ravens were undoubtedly responsible for tearing it up.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to B. Gepp and M. Gepp who were present on the island in 1973, and P. Martinsen who accompanied me in 1974, for help in identifying the species. For comments on a draft of this article I thank also S. A. Parker, Curator of Birds, South Australian Museum.

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