

BRIDLED TERN IN THE SOUTH EAST OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA.

The Bridled Tern *Sterna anaethetus* is found mainly in tropical and sub-tropical waters, and only rarely in South Australian waters usually in summer. The first record for South Australia was of a breeding pair on Baudin Rocks near Robe on 4 January 1968 (Bonnin 1968). A pair then bred there in summer 1968/69 (Bonnin 1969) and sight records continued for that area until 1975 (Bonnin 1982; Higgins and Davies 1996). The only other record of Bridled Tern in South Australia was one bird seen by R. Lovell and W. Allen on 1 January 1972 at Troubridge Island in Gulf St Vincent near Edithburgh (Lovell 1972). This note describes numerous sightings by myself and/or my husband Ian Mitchener at Carpenter Rocks during summer 2001/02.

On 28 December 2001 I positively identified as Bridled Tern an unfamiliar tern that had been present in Gerloff Bay since mid-December (see Figure). Despite overcast conditions, I obtained good views of the bird, which is described as

follows:

'Dark back and wings; black cap with white 'half collar', but black on the back of the neck; white front, black legs and bill; white V above bill, with white extending above, and slightly beyond, the eye.'

Most sightings of the Bridled Tern occurred at a location known locally as the 'Cray Dump', which is a cliff about 5 metres high on the western side of Gerloff Bay, on Cape Banks (see Figure). This is an Environmental Protection Authority licensed waste disposal site where organic waste from the local southern rock lobster (*Jasus edwardsii*) factory is returned to the sea. This waste is mainly the bodies of rock lobster that have died in holding tanks. When thrown over the cliff face, some of the waste catches on ledges and the remainder falls to the small beach below to be gradually dispersed into the sea by high tides. A reef 100 m offshore, but parallel to it, is exposed at low tide. Between the reef and shore are two rock stacks where Silver Gulls *Larus novaehollandiae* nest. The gulls feed on the waste

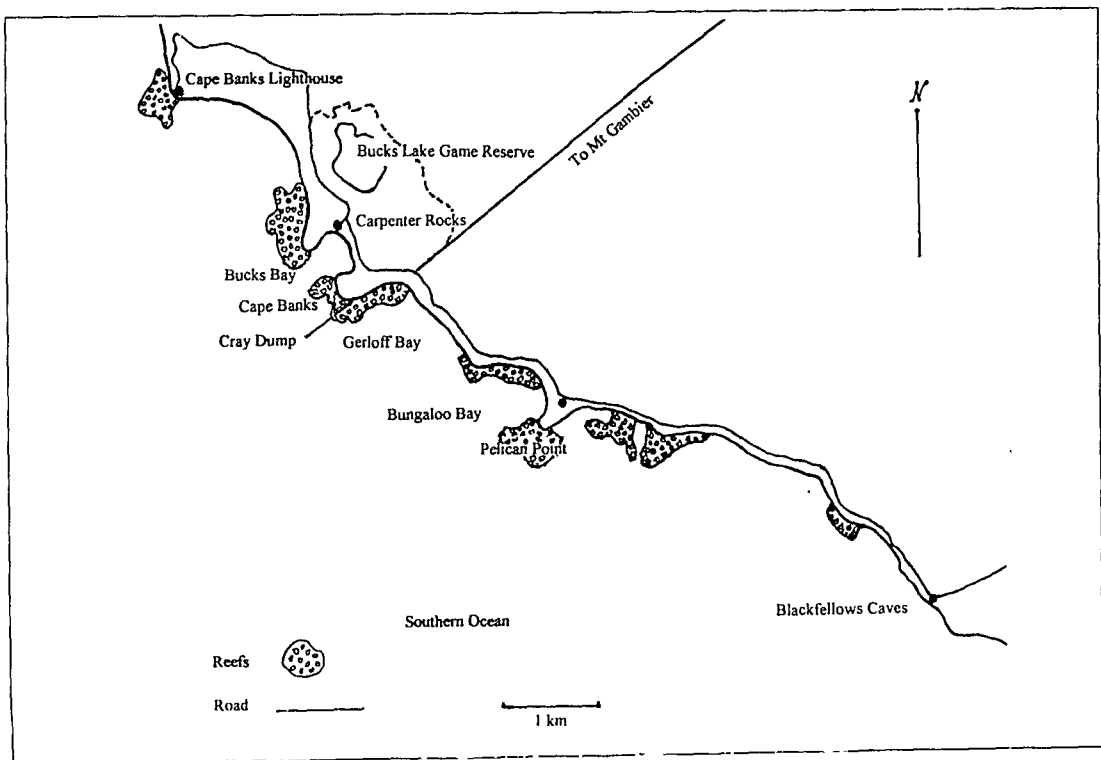


Figure. Map of Gerloff Bay and surrounds, showing the Cray Dump and Cape Banks.

and vigorously defend the area, rising on updraughts, hovering and squawking at intruders. The Bridled Tern was never observed feeding, but it behaved in a similar manner to the gulls, rising on the updraught and hovering at eye level, facing the observer, sometimes as close as 3 m. The tern appeared to regard itself as part of the gull flock and to have formed a pair bond with a gull. The tern would often join a gull perched on a particular rock. On one occasion, on 10 January 2002, the tern crouched down, dropped its left wing and tried to mount a gull. This was a quick but unsuccessful action, and the tern flew away (MC, Peter Penney and John Berggy, pers. obs.).

Our home overlooks Gerloff Bay, but the Cray Dump and nearby rock stacks are not visible from it. At 1300 h on 5 March 2002, I observed from my lounge window the Bridled Tern and a Silver Gull flying east across the bay. The gull was in front, with the tern in close attendance, and both birds turned together. The gull joined other gulls on the beach in front of some shacks, but the tern did not settle and remained in the air nearby for a short time before flying off.

While fishing on the reef the following day, I was surprised by what I considered to be unusual bird cries. I was facing south, and a gull and tern appeared from behind me, flying south-east and out to sea. The gull was in front making a loud 'peeping' cry, closely followed by the tern, which was making a 'mewing' cry.

During summer the reef is exposed at low tide. Ian and I were often on the reef checking our crayfish pot or line fishing, and often accompanied by a neighbour's dog. The dog would swim towards the Cray Dump and rock stacks, and its barking cause the roosting Silver Gulls to lift and fly about. It also appeared to cause the Bridled Tern to fly across to investigate us on the reef and swoop low over us before flying back to roost on the rocks in a similar manner to the gulls.

From the first sighting in mid-December 2001 to the end of February 2002, the Bridled Tern was seen regularly near the Cray Dump, always in the company of Silver Gulls. But with the winding down of the rock lobster season early, little refuse was tipped at the Cray Dump in March. Most of the Silver Gulls deserted the area, congregating instead across the bay in front of shacks where a build-up of decaying seaweed apparently provided good forage for the gulls. The Bridled Tern appeared reluctant to join the gulls there and did not settle on the two occasions

that it was observed going there with a gull.

I last saw the Bridled Tern at about 0700 h on 20 March 2002 when I was out earlier than usual and saw it fly over to the reef whilst I checked my crayfish pot.

During January 2002 we also made three sightings of two dark terns flying as a pair from the general area of Bucks Bay east out of sight towards Gerloff Bay. The sightings at 0745 h on 11 January and 1845 h on 17 January were brief and in poor light, but at 1845 h on 19 January I heard high-pitched calls and had clear views of their dark grey backs and the white leading edge of their wings. Dark grey rather than black backs suggests that they were Bridled Terns (Pizzey and Knight 1999), but they were not identified positively as I was unable to see their facial markings.

As we observed during January a pair of dark terns and on other occasions a single Bridled Tern (always in the company of one or more Silver Gulls), it is possible that three Bridled Terns may have been present in the Gerloff Bay area. Despite constant checking, Bridled Tern was not sighted at Pelican Point, 2.5 km to the south-east, where a large number of Crested Tern *Sterna bergii* roost.

In conclusion, one Bridled Tern was definitely and regularly in Gerloff Bay for the period 17 December 2001 to 20 March 2002. In January 2002 a pair of dark terns was present.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank an anonymous referee and David Edey for their useful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. I also thank Bill Matheson for his additions to the figure.

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Received 28 October 2002; accepted 27 March 2003