

BIRDS OF THE INVESTIGATOR GROUP

With Special Reference to Flinders Island.

by JOHN ECKERT

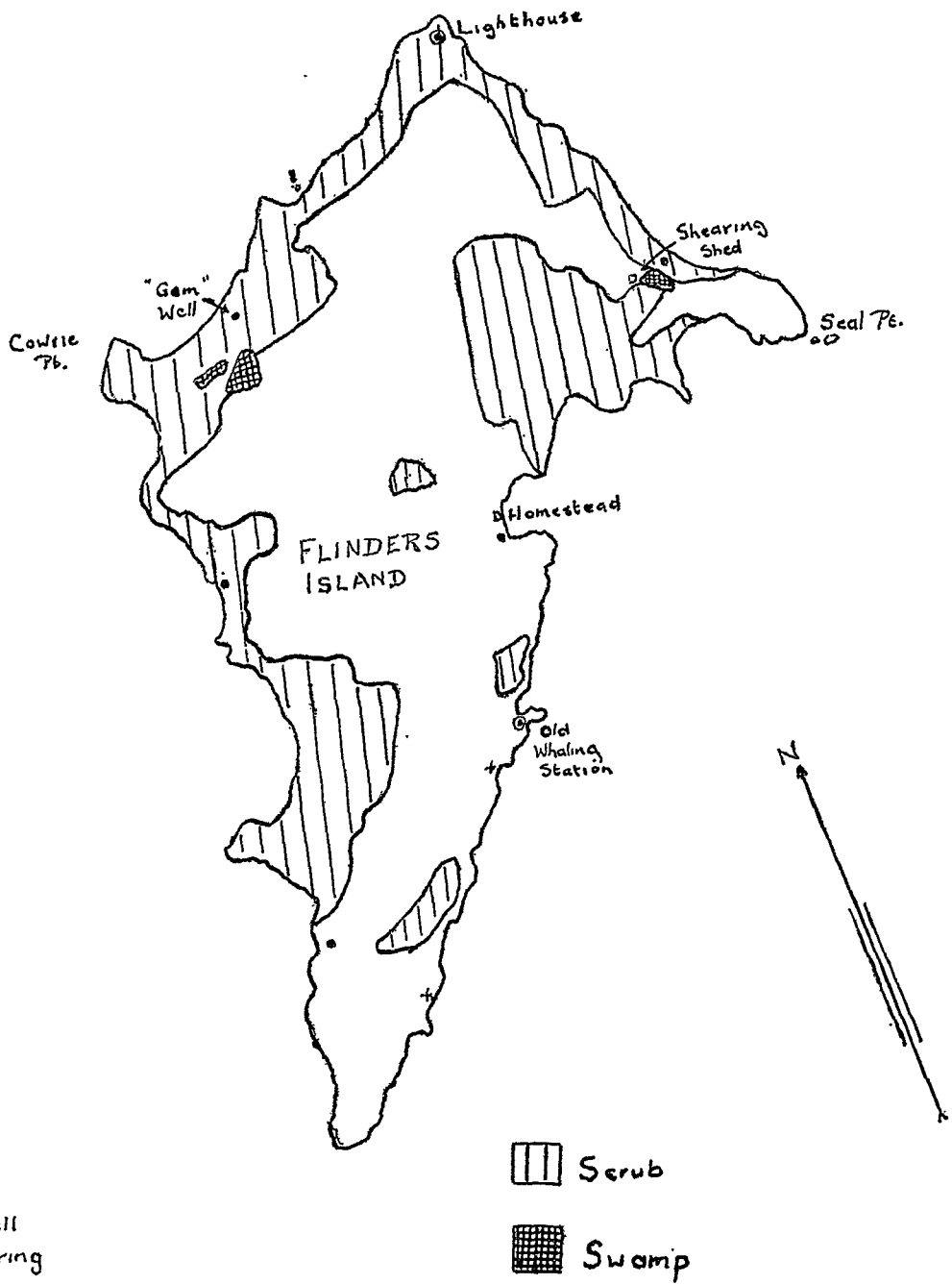
The Investigator Group of islands lies off the coast of Eyre Peninsula roughly southwest of Elliston. It consists of three main island associations, Waldegrave (two islands) near the coast, Flinders eighteen miles offshore and Pearson (three semi-joined islands and several islets) about forty miles offshore. Two other small islands Ward and Topgallant complete the group which was discovered and named by Matthew Flinders.

Pearson Island has thriving populations of a rock-wallaby and a native rat while Flinders Island has an indigenous scrub-wallaby now, unfortunately, close to extinction. This mammal interest has inspired a number of scientific visits to the islands over the years and notes on the bird-life have been supplied for Pearson by Waite, Wood-Jones and Cleland (1923, *Trans. Royal Soc.*, pp. 119-126) and Paton (1969, *Trans. Royal Soc.*, in preparation) while a film made on the island made in 1961 shows a flock of waders with the feeding actions of Sanderlings, *Calidris alba*, on the beach, but not depicted clearly enough for positive identification. Flinders commented on several birds of Waldegrave in 1803 and a more comprehensive list is given by Jenkin and Waterman (*S. Aust. Orn.* 24, 1965, 45-48). Finlayson listed the birds of Flinders Island during a three-week stay in February 1937 (*S. Aust. Orn.*, 14, 1938, 141-146). The writer spent a week there in July 1968 and since then the Pearson Island expedition of January 1969 spent nearly two days there (Paton, pers. comm.). These sources, plus information from the owners of Flinders Island, Mr. and Mrs. W. Baldock and a list of specimens taken on the island in January 1924, by Wood-Jones (*S. Aust. Orn.* 7, 1924, 170) have been used to compile the bird list (below).

Flinders Island, the largest of the group, is a low, fairly flat island in excess of 9,000 acres in area. It is essentially a granite base with a limestone cap, the surface comprising a gently undulating plain. The highest point is a granite outcrop 215 ft. above sea-level in the south-eastern portion of the island but the northern cliffs also reach 200

ft. The soil varies from poor white sand in the coastal dune areas to rich red loam in some flats, the major portion consisting of arable limestone land. Habitation has been continuous for over 100 years and much of the better land has been cleared for agriculture and grazing. However, about 2,000 acres of scrub and semi-scrub remains, mainly near the coast. It is probably the most fertile of South Australia's smaller offshore islands and produced thousands of bushels of wheat annually for many years but shipping difficulties have now greatly curtailed agricultural activities. Originally quite an area of mallee existed but of this less than ten trees survive. There is a small area of Casuarina but the dominant tree is Black Tea-tree (*Melaleuca lanceolata*) which with Juniper (*Myoporum*) and Grey-bush (*Olearia*) forms the bulk of the woodland although a number of other shrubs, notably *Correa*, are present. The island is now watered by four wells and two springs, water being reticulated to almost every paddock. The southern waters are of good quality but the three most northerly wells are rather brackish, the Gem well testing at 1,050 grains per gallon (15,000 p.p.m.). There are also brackish non-permanent swamps near the Gem well and the shearing-shed.

The writer visited Flinders Island from July 1-7, 1968, with a party led by P. F. Aitken, other members being J. Forrest and M. Smith. The primary purpose was a survey of the wallaby population but this afforded a good opportunity to also survey the birds. While mid-winter was hardly the ideal time to compile a large list, a good indication of the resident species was obtained. Bird-life in general was abundant, Pipits and Chats being numerous in the cleared areas while Silvereyes, Red-capped Robins and Scrub-Wrens are plentiful in most areas of bush. At the time of our visit the best area for birds was the coastal scrub between the Gem well and the lighthouse, every species of bush bird recorded during our visit being encountered there. This was near the poorest water and it would be interesting



to know if the birds tended to move to spots where better quality water was available during summer. The three honeyeater species present were unexpected and their presence may have been part of a southward or westward movement involving these species on the mainland. They appeared to feed mainly on the flowering *Correa*. The Singing and Spiney-cheeked Honeyeaters were not recorded although both were numerous at Elliston. The Galah and the House-Sparrow have apparently colonised the island naturally since Finlayson's visit as he mentions neither although listing the Starling. Three magpies were introduced by the Baldocks in 1961 but began to fail and a further seven were brought out. These have multiplied and magpies now seem established as a breeding species. Two introduced predators, the cat and the rat (*Rattus rattus*) are now present but, apart from the penguins, appear not to have affected the bird-life to any appreciable extent. Flinders Island is fortunate in that its present owners are conservation-minded and do their best to protect the wild-life. Waders and migratory bush-birds probably visit the island at times and a survey made in summer would doubtless add to the list considerably.

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The following list was compiled from all sources (see above). Unless otherwise indicated the notes refer to my own visit to Flinders Island in July 1968.

Abbreviations:

F.—has been recorded on Flinders Island.

P.—has been recorded on Pearson Island.

W.—has been recorded on Waldegrave Island.

(F)—listed by Finlayson.

(P)—listed by Paton.

(WJ)—specimens by Wood Jones.

Birds estimated to be in numbers between 25 and 100 marked as common.

Birds estimated to be in numbers above 100 marked as abundant.

Little Penguin *Eudyptula minor*. F.P.W. Only one freshly-dead bird seen. The caves where Finlayson noted evidence of large numbers now seem almost entirely deserted and it appears that the species has declined since that time. (F) (P).

Albatross sp. *Diomedea ? melanophrys*. F. Three single birds seen off the south-east coast appeared to be Black-browed from the yellowish bill and wide dark edging to the underwing.

Giant Petrel *Macronectes giganteus*. F.W. A banded bird found dead some years ago by the Baldocks.

Short-tailed Shearwater *Puffinus tenuirostris*. F.W. Seen offshore by Finlayson and Paton. Not known to breed on the island. (F) (P).

White-faced Storm-Petrel *Pelagodroma marina*. P.

Red-tailed Tropic-Bird *Phaethon rubricauda*. F. Some years ago a Tropic-Bird was seen circling over a domestic hen with newly-hatched chicks. It could not be frightened away and so was shot. One of the long, thin, red tail-feathers was kept and provides proof of the record, which is more interesting in view of Cleland's party recording a pair on Pearson Island in 1923. The species is known to breed on rocky ledges and although the 1969 expedition to Pearson Island did not record the bird, one wonders if possibly it could occasionally breed in the area.

Gannet *Sula bassana*. F. Several fishing off the south coast and two north of the Lighthouse.

Black Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*. F.P. Seen singly or in pairs on several occasions, sometimes crossing the island near the homestead. (P).

Little Black Cormorant *P. sulcirostris*. F. Noted only by Finlayson. (F).

Black-faced Cormorant *P. fuscescens*. F.W. Common, numbers seen all round the island. A flock of 47 resting on rocks off the north-west coast. (P).

Pied Cormorant *P. varius*. F. One at Seal Pt. and one near the southern tip. (P).

White-faced Heron *Ardea novaehollandiae*. F.P. Seen in several places with a flock of 5 at a swamp near the Gem well. (P).

Reef Heron *Egretta sacra*. P.

Yellow-billed Spoonbill *Platalea flavipes*. F. A dead bird found at the shearing-shed swamp in January 1968 by Mr. Baldock.

Portion of the bill was retained as proof of this interesting occurrence.

Cape Barren Goose *Cereopsis novaehollandiae*. F.P.W. Small numbers seen occasionally by the Baldocks. These are probably visitors from Waldegrave which is a breeding island.

Grey Teal *Anas gibberifrons*. F. A small flock stayed several weeks in the homestead bay some years ago, this being the only occurrence during the Baldocks' tenancy. There are, however, remains of duck-traps in the swamps near the Gem well thought to have been used about 1956.

Wedge-tailed Eagle *Aquila audax*. F. Although at least a pair are considered to be resident by the Baldocks, the species was not sighted during our visit. (P).

White-breasted Sea-Eagle *Haliaeetus leucogaster*. F.P.W. One seen over Cowrie Pt. Two immatures found drowned in a stock-water tank some years ago by Mr. Baldock.

Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*. F.W. Seen daily and in all parts of the coast. Probably two or three pairs were present. One of the ornithological highlights of our stay was to watch daily, from the interior of the homestead, Ospreys fishing in the bay, the birds often passing by within a few yards of the house. A large nest on the south-east coast did not appear to have been used the previous summer although young had been reared there the year before. (F) (P).

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*. F. A young bird brought to the island by the Baldocks as a pet later went wild but stayed in the vicinity for a considerable time. The record of Jenkin and Waterman possibly refers to this bird.

Nankeen Kestrel *F. cenchroides*, F.P.W. Several pairs, often seen over the island or cliffs. (P).

Stubble Quail *Coturnix pectoralis*. F. One seen in stubble. Only this species said to occur.

Pied Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*. F.W. At least two pairs present.

Sooty Oystercatcher *H. fuliginosus*. F.P. Pairs seen in several places, usually on rocks. (F) (P) (WJ).

Spur-winged Plover *Vanellus miles*. F.P.W. Five at the Gem swamp and one at the shearing-shed swamp. (F) (P).

Banded Plover *V. tricolor*. F. One pair seen in the lighthouse paddock.

Hooded Dotterel *Charadrius rubricollis*. F.W. A pair on each of the large sandy beaches visited. (WJ).

Red-capped Dotterel *C. alexandrinus*. F. Two at the shearing-shed swamp and three near the old whaling station. (F) (WJ).

Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*. F.P. Noted only by Paton. (P).

Eastern Curlew *Numenius madagascariensis*. F. Noted only by Finlayson. (F).

Red-necked Stint *Calidris ruficollis*. F. (P) (WJ).

Silver Gull *Larus novaehollandiae*. F.P. ?W. Common, up to 60 at the shearing-shed and 40 at the house. (F) (P).

Pacific Gull *L. pacificus*. F.P. ?W. Several adult pairs and some immatures. One immature seen to fly up and drop a shell-fish onto rocks several times. (F) (P).

Caspian Tern *Hydroprogne tschegrava*. F. Noted only by Paton. (P).

Crested Tern *Sterna bergii*. F.P.W. Seen all round the coast. 20 or more resting on rocks at times. (P).

Fairy Tern *S. nereis*. F.P. A single bird in the homestead bay one wet day.

Brush Bronzewing *Phaps elegans*. F. Flushed often in the scrub. Up to 5 seen in one day.

Rock Dove *Columba livia*. F. A stray bird present at the house during most of our stay.

Galah *Cacatua roseicapilla*. F.W. A number of birds now present. May possibly breed in the cliffs. (P).

Rock Parrot *Neophema petrophila*. F.P.W. Seen annually by the owner. (F).

Budgerigah *Melopsittacus undulatus*. P.

Fan-tailed Cuckoo *Cacomantis pyrrhophanus* F. Common in most wooded areas and calling frequently.

Horsfield Bronze-Cuckoo *Chrysococcyx basalis*, F.P. Status similar to the preceding.

Fork-tailed Swift *Apus pacificus*. P.

Welcome Swallow *Hirundo tahitica*. F.P. Common all over the island, about 20 near the house at times. Numbers nest in some of the caves (F) (P).

Pipit *Anthus novaeseelandiae*. F. Abundant in all cleared and semi-cleared areas (F) (P) (WJ).

Little Grassbird *Megalurus gramineus*. W.

Brown Songlark *Cinclorhamphus cruralis*. F. Two males singing above some stubble.

White-fronted Chat *Ephthianura albifrons*. F.P.W. Abundant, mostly in the cleared areas. (F) (P).

Crimson Chat *E. tricolor*. F.P. The Baldocks reported to Paton that birds resembling this species had been seen in the latter part of 1968.

Spotted Scrub-Wren *Sericornis frontalis*. F. Abundant in most wooded areas. (P) (WJ).

Willie Wagtail *Rhipidura leucophrys*. F. A stray bird seen several years ago by the Baldocks. Noted also by Paton. (P).

Red-capped Robin *Petroica goodenovii*. F.P. Abundant in wooded areas and semi-open country. (F) (P) (WJ).

Golden Whistler *Pachycephala pectoralis*. F.P. Several seen or heard in taller tea-tree between the lighthouse and the Gem well.

Silvereye *Zosterops lateralis*, F.P. Abundant in most of the bush. By far the most numerous species on the island. I detected no difference between these and normal *lateralis* but find that one of Wood-Jones specimens tended towards *gouldi* which is significant in the light of the extension of the range of this form into South Australia recently. (F) (P) (WJ).

Singing Honeyeater *Meliphaga virescens*. P.

Yellow-plumed Honeyeater *M. ornata*. F. Only one bird seen.

White-fronted Honeyeater *Phylidonyris albifrons*. F. At least two pairs near the lighthouse. Singing quite frequently.

Tawny-crowned Honeyeater *P. melanops*. F. Several on heathy country near the lighthouse.

House-Sparrow *Passer domesticus*. F.P. Abundant, flocks likely to be seen in any part of the island. (P).

Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*, F.P. A flock of about 100 seen in open country on two occasions. None noted about the house or sheds and seemingly much scarcer than the Sparrow. (F) (P).

Masked Wood-Swallow *Artamus personatus*. P.

White-backed Magpie *Gymnorhina tibicen*. F. At least 20 present and seen some miles from the house. (F).

Raven *Corvus* sp. F.P.W. Common, up to 20 seen in a flock. Recorded as *coronoides* but are possibly *mellori*. (F) (P).

Unidentified Birds:

Small dark hawk. F. (Finlayson).

Wader. P. (film made 1961).

Owl. P.

Kingfisher. F. Some years ago, a small green kingfisher was seen about the house for a few days.

Currawong *Strepera* sp. F. see Finlayson.

Acknowledgments:

I wish to acknowledge the assistance given by other members of the party in recording bird-life during this survey.

To Mr. and Mrs. Baldock I am extremely grateful, firstly for their generous hospitality which made the trip so pleasant, secondly for providing transport to enable a thorough coverage of the area and finally, for the invaluable information given regarding birds past and present and concerning the general topography of their property, Flinders Island.

I am also deeply indebted to Mrs. J. Paton for allowing me the use of her lists to make this article as up-to-date as possible.

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