

WEDGE ISLAND

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TERRAIN AND HISTORY

Wedge Island was named in 1802 by Matthew Flinders because of its shape. It is the largest of the Gambier Islands which lie across the mouth of Spencer Gulf, mid-way between Yorke Peninsula and Thistle Island, which in turn lies east of the southern extremity of Eyre Peninsula. North Gambier Island lying to the north of Wedge is the second largest. The highest point of Wedge Island is 201 m where there is a lighthouse, and where a radar station was built during the Second World War and manned by a staff of 30. The island has a base of dark granite capped with calciferous sandstone. The surface area of approximately 1,000 ha is undulating, and there are a few small sand dunes,³ apart from those at the water's edge. There are three beaches on the northern coast; and behind the dunes of the west beach are four salt pans. On the eastern side there is a second dune which extends up to the crest of a limestone ridge. Most of the lower-lying sandy soil on the northern aspect of the island has been sown to grain. Apart from the northern beaches the island ends in precipitous cliffs. There is no permanent water other than brackish bore water supplied to troughs. The perpetual lease has been taken up by Mr Norman Growden. The mess hut from the radar station has been transported to the homestead, and together these buildings provide accommodation for 10 visitors. The island is served by a light plane flown from Port Lincoln. It is now a sanctuary and a holiday resort but is still farmed. At the time of our visit there were 600 sheep on the island. Goats, which had previously infested the island, have been eradicated. On Haycock Rock, immediately west of Wedge Island, 16 seals were basking. A few more were seen swimming in Shark Bay, Wedge Island.

A visit was made between 3-10 February 1979.

In 1907 a record of birds seen was made by J. M. Mellor (1907). S. A. White (1916) reported on his visit in 1916. A brief visit was made by H. H. Finlayson (1951) in 1949.

VEGETATION

The greater part of the island was covered with grass, studded with Coastal Daisy *Ilexia axillaris* and introduced African Boxthorn *Lycium ferocissimum*. The Coastal Daisy was

dense on the sand dunes where the bushes grew to approximately 2 m in height and were almost touching each other in some places. Coastal Saltbush *Rhagodia baccata* was much less abundant. In one area there were some 5 ha of scrub remaining. The prominent species here was teatree *Melaluca lanceolata* and mallee (*Eucalyptus* sp.), scattered amongst which were sheoaks *Casurina stricta* and a few specimens of Kangaroo Thorn *Acacia armata* and Red Pea Flower *Templetonia retusa*. The owner stated that the area of scrub was diminishing in size and not regenerating because of constant grazing by sheep. The sand dunes behind the beaches on the northern coast were also lightly wooded. Four small salt lagoons behind the dunes were covered with samphire.

In 1907 the island was well wooded (Mellor). Photographs by White suggest that there was more scrub then than now. In 1936 Wood Jones (1936) saw evidence of former colonies of Mutton Birds *Puffinus tenuirostris* and suggested that the colony had become extinct as a result of the destruction of the vegetation by goats; but Finlayson queries the correctness of this deduction. In the open grassland the very few remaining sheoaks were moribund. Several Norfolk Island Pines had been planted and were well established.

BIRDS

Thirty-eight species were identified. The numbers stated were actual counts when only a few were seen, but only an estimate when the numbers were larger.

EMU *Dromaius novaehollandiae*

Sixteen birds including three half-grown, the progeny of the surviving pair from six birds introduced four years ago. Boxthorn berries comprised part of their food.

LITTLE PENGUIN *Eudyptula minor*

Seen only by day at the end of crevices between the beach and the overhanging cliffs adjacent to the small jetty.

BLACK-FACED SHAG *Leucocarbo fuscescens*

Occasional birds seen.

PIED CORMORANT *Phalacrocorax varius*

Forty seen on a roosting ledge early one morning.

EASTERN REEF EGRET *Egretta sacra*

A solitary bird, dark phase, seen on several days.

OSPREY *Pandion haliaetus*

One bird was seen on the west coast and a pair on the eastern coast at Shark Bay.

WHITE-BELLIED SEA-EAGLE

Haliaeetus leucogaster

One adult bird was seen to fly to a nest and perch on the edge. No young were discernible. This nest was built on a ledge near the top of a cliff. Immediately adjacent to it was an old nest which had been built up from the ledge almost to the overhanging cliff surface ledge so that further additions to the nest would have been impossible. This nest was approximately four times the height of the bird.

WEDGE-TAILED EAGLE *Aquila audax*

One pair was seen on most days. The nest was found in one of the few remaining sheoaks in the centre of the island: so presumably this pair is resident. The source of food supply was not evident. The only fauna indigenous to the island were two species of lizard. The introduced animals were wombats, acclimatised well, and sheep. The carcase of the only recently dead sheep found had not been eaten. There is a previous record of one bird seen by White.

MARSH HARRIER *Circus aeruginosus*

Two adult birds seen on most days.

BROWN FALCON *Falco berigora*

This bird was seen on three occasions only when flying and at a distance, so that identification was made on a silhouette, size and flight only. A specimen taken by White "had the stomach much distended by great numbers of lizards".

NANKEEN KESTREL *Falco cenchroides*

One bird was seen on several days, but the owner stated that at times there were more.

STUBBLE QUAIL *Coturnix novaezelandiae*

Seen in the stubble grassland and barley crops and heard daily. Before the island became a sanctuary it was a well-known quail-shooting area for passing yachtsmen.

BUFF-BANDED RAIL *Rallus philippensis*

Three birds seen in a group between 08.00 and 10.00 daily from the kitchen window.

SOUTHERN STONE-CURLEW

Burhinus magnirostris

Heard at night. Search of the scrub in which they sheltered by day revealed three birds certainly, and possibly five.

SOOTY OYSTERCATCHER

Haematopus fuliginosus

Five pairs dispersed around the island. One of these birds competed with Silver Gulls and Pacific Gulls for fish residue.

MASKED LAPWING *Vanellus miles*

Two pairs were seen only on the beach and at all times of the day.

HOODED PLOVER *Charadrius rubricollis*

One pair flocking with one immature bird.

MONGOLIAN PLOVER

Charadrius mongolus

Four birds were on the beach on the day of our arrival, but were not seen subsequently.

SILVER GULL *Larus novaehollandiae*

Forty.

PACIFIC GULL *Larus pacificus*

Six adults — four immatures.

CASPIAN TERN *Hydroprogne caspia*

One to three seen daily.

CRESTED TERN *Sterna bergii*

Thirty on the beaches at sundown.

BRUSH BRONZEWING *Phaps elegans*

Three drinking at trough at 18.00 and one other calling when seen in scrub.

ROCK PARROT *Neophema petrophila*

Several small parties were seen on various parts of the island, the largest number being eight birds.

HORSFIELD'S BRONZE-CUCKOO

Chrysococcyx basalis

A solitary bird in a wooded area.

WELCOME SWALLOW *Hirundo neoxena*

Thirty birds scattered over the island.

RICHARD'S PIPIT *Anthus novaeseelandiae*

Sparsely scattered over grassland. Eight were seen together on one beach.

RED-CAPPED ROBIN *Petroica goodenovii*

A single well-marked male was seen near the trough in the casurina scrub on three occasions.

GOLDEN WHISTLER

Pachycephala pectoralis

One pair in proximity to the Robin in the casurina scrub.

GREY FANTAIL *Rhipidura fuliginosa*

Four pairs were seen, three in the largest area of scrub and one in scrub on the dunes on the north-east coast.

WHITE-BROWED SCRUBWREN

Sericornis frontalis

Common throughout the scrub and the more open areas.

PURPLE-GAPED HONEYEATER

Lichenostomus cratitius

Six were seen in a flowering melaleuca on the coastal dunes before dusk on 6 February 1979.

NEW HOLLAND HONEYEATER

Phylidonyris novaehollandiae

Four were seen from the kitchen window a few m distant while the Buff-banded Rail was under observation on 7 February 1979.

TAWNY-CROWNED HONEYEATER

Phylidonyris melanops

Five were seen perched on tree tops on 7 February 1979.

The closest one, observed in detail, lacked the black marking extending down to the neck. It was therefore immature.

SILVEREYE *Zosterops lateralis*

By far the commonest bird and seen everywhere. Ten to twenty birds could be seen at the trough at any time, and the change-over was rapid, most of the birds dipping the bill into the water once or twice only and flying off.

HOUSE SPARROW *Passer domesticus*

Two hundred about the homestead.

COMMON STARLING *Sturnus vulgaris*.

Fifty.

AUSTRALIAN RAVEN *Corvus coronoides*

Thirty were seen daily usually in small flocks and mostly along the northern coast. About 10 birds were feeding at the refuse dump on most days.

DISCUSSION

Mellor recorded the Australian Magpie *Gymnorhina tibicen*, Superb Fairy-wren *Malurus cyaneus*, Brown Thornbill *Acanthiza pusilla* and the Yellow-rumped Thornbill *Acanthiza chrysorrhoa*. White found the Banded Lapwing *Vanellus tricolor*, White-fronted Chat *Ephthianura albifrons* and the Singing Honeyeater *Lichenostomus virescens*. Finlayson saw a Black-shouldered Kite *Elanus notatus* or Letter-winged Kite *Elanus scriptus*; and the owner at that time had seen Black Swan *Cygnus atratus* and the Cape Barren Goose *Cereopsis novaehollandiae*. The Cape Barren Goose has never bred on Wedge Island, but pinioned fledglings had been introduced from North Gambier Island where they bred

prior to Finlayson's visit. A colony was never established. The present owner has seen only one Goose on the island in four years, but states that Australian Shelduck *Tadorna tadornoides* arrive as soon as the salt pans are filled.

The disappearance of the Banded Lapwing and the Magpie could perhaps be accounted for by the presence of eagles, or possibly by the activities of 30 servicemen during the war. Predation by eagles could also explain the diminution in numbers of Buff-banded Rails and Southern Stone-curlew, although the latter are likely to become extinct on the island as the remnant of scrub disappears. White reported that "the great numbers of these birds had congregated in the casuarina scrub". The casuarina has almost gone now and will not regenerate whilst the scrub is grazed. Mr Growden considered that if it were to be fenced the Boxthorn would take over, unless the island was cleared of this noxious weed.

The honeyeater that would be expected in this habitat, and that has been seen before, is the Singing Honeyeater. This was not seen or heard in eight days.

Species not recorded previously were the Grey Fantail, a conspicuous bird unlikely to have been missed, the Golden Whistler and three species of honeyeater. Each of the small groups of the latter were only seen on one occasion and on one day, in spite of repeated searching to find them again in all likely areas of habitat. They might have been nomads in transit.

The Purple-gaped Honeyeater was recorded on the adjacent Thistle Island in 21 September 1975 (Close, pers. comm.).

REFERENCES

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