

RED-TAILED TROPICBIRDS AND OTHER BIRDS OF SOUTH NEPTUNE ISLANDS.

Although Red-tailed Tropicbirds *Phaethon rubricauda* have been observed right around the coast of Australia, they are rarely reported visitors to the coastline of South Australia. When they do appear they are clearly observable - bold, noisy and magnificent with their spectacular tail streamers.

The Red-tailed Tropicbird lives in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Two subspecies of Red-tailed Tropicbirds breed near Australia: in two atolls in the Coral Sea and on Raine, Norfolk and Lord Howe Islands, and on Cocos-Keeling and Christmas Islands and Sugarloaf Rock in Western Australia (Blakers *et al.* 1984). They are most often sighted north of Australia or along its west coast. In 1919 Red-tailed Tropicbirds were seen at North Shields, north of Port Lincoln and since then have been recorded at only five other locations in South Australia, that is at Pearson, Flinders and Kangaroo Islands, Cape Spencer and Encounter Bay. Sightings were from December through to May which covers the breeding season (Parker *et al.* 1979). Speculations have been made on whether the Red-tailed Tropicbirds breed undetected on some of the many offshore islands of South Australia. Sightings of the birds on South Neptune Island in the summers of 1991-1992 and 1992-1993 suggest this is indeed so.

The South Neptune islands lie about centre to the entrance to Spencer's Gulf, the most remote offshore islands of the chain extending into the Great Australian Bight. The three small islands cover an area of 202 ha. The granite islands are low, only to 50 m above sea level, and open heath and chenopod shrubland predominates. There are no feral cats or snakes on the islands; no mammals (bush rats) have been sighted. The south-west cliffs are too rugged for nesting but, as on Sugarloaf Rock (Tarbuton 1977), the vegetated section has suitable ledges and small flat areas.

The identification of two Red-tailed Tropicbirds seen several weeks earlier at South Neptune Island was confirmed on 11 December 1991. They were observed frequently throughout December often attempting to scavenge in the large Crested Tern *Sterna bergii* colony. On 9 January 1992, the two adults were observed accompanied by a juvenile with no tail streamers. The sustained presence of the two adult birds and the juvenile indicate that they well might have been breeding in the vicinity. The

following season continual sightings of the two mature birds were made from 6 October 1992. Again the Red-tailed Tropicbirds could be frequently seen near the Crested Tern colony, but while the Red-tailed Tropicbirds regularly returned to a place in the granite cliffs, no nest could be located. Three mature Tropicbirds were sighted on 14 December 1993. In 1993-1994 the Crested Terns nested on a relatively inaccessible part of the South Neptune Islands and no Red-tailed Tropicbirds were observed.

Crested Terns have long been recorded as breeding in large numbers on South Neptune Island. So too have Silver Gulls *Larus novaehollandiae* who compete with the Red-tailed Tropicbirds for Crested Tern eggs. The best composite list of South Neptune Islands' birds is that prepared by I. and S. Stirling and G. Shaughnessy (1970); Tony Robinson provides a more recent list in *South Australia's offshore islands* (in prep.). Other birds not yet recorded but also breeding on the islands are Buff-banded Rails *Gallirallus philippensis* and scrubwrens. Fairy Terns *Sterna nereis* in December 1992 and again in October 1994. Crows *Corvus* sp. continue to be occasional visitors as noted by an early light-keeper (Perryman 1936). Stray pigeons and Little Penguins *Eudyptula minor* also visit and once a Tawny-crowned Honeyeater *Phylidonyris melanops* was seen.

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