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THE SUNBIRD

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WINTER BIRD OBSERVATIONS FOR CAYS IN THE SOUTHERN SECTION OF THE SWAIN REEFS, QUEENSLAND

JOHN HENRY MOVERLEY

ABSTRACT

Observations of birds on cays in the Swain Reefs were made during July 1983 and 1984. Fifteen species of birds were observed of which eight were breeding. Species that were breeding have also been recorded breeding on the cays in summer. Four species were found breeding outside of their recognized nesting season.

INTRODUCTION

The results of two winter surveys of birds on Swain Reef cays are presented here. No previous data on winter populations of birds in the Swain Reefs have been published. However, a summer (November 1976) survey of Swain Reef seabirds was published by Limpus and Lyon (1981), who say that the avifauna on the Swain Reef cays is intermediate to that on the more inshore Barrier Reef cays and the Coral Sea cays. By this it is meant that some species present on the Barrier Reef cays but absent from Coral Sea cays were found on Swain Reef cays together with other species present on the Coral Sea cays but absent from the Barrier Reef cays.

Limpus and Lyon (1981) recorded twelve species of seabirds of which ten were breeding. They suggested it was possible that in winter different species of terns may be found nesting on the cays. As well as the normal seasonal factors (e.g. differences in temperature, daylength, abundance of food) other differences between winter and summer which may affect nesting birds are that winter is the dry season, with persistent, frequently strong south-easterly winds, and in summer cyclones occur. Also, only during summer would birds be disturbed by nesting turtles.

STUDY AREA AND METHODS

The southern section of the Swains Reef is approximately 175 km east of Shoalwater Bay, central Queensland (approx. 21°30'S., 151°00'E). The Swain Reef's cays were formed from coral sand and rubble. They have a long axis less than 350 m and maximum elevation less than 2 m. Vegetation on the cays ranges from nil to meadows of low grasses and herbs with bare patches. The summer nesting activities of turtles cause a great deal of disturbance to these islands, resulting in a topography with small undulations.

Names for the cays of the Swain Reefs are confused. Official names and common names are not always the same, and sometimes the same name is applied to different cays. The names used in this paper follow those used by Limpus and Lyon (1981) and are the names accepted by the Queensland Place Names Board.

Cays were visited in July 1983 and 1984. Visits were part of a wider ecological study in which several projects examining different ecological aspects of the cays were carried out. Usually activities of project participants disturbed birds roosting on the cays before they could be fully surveyed. Consequently surveys of non-nesting birds were normally carried out when the birds returned after other projects had been completed and people had ceased moving about the islands. This disturbance may have resulted in some species being missed on particular cays.

In 1983 nine cays were visited and in 1984 seven of these were re-visited. The two cays not visited in 1984 were Hixon and Sunray. Both of these were small and appeared to be more susceptible to being inundated or completely wave-washed than the other cays.

In 1983 species presence, breeding activity and the stage of breeding were recorded. In 1984 the numbers of nests, the numbers of eggs and/or nestlings (i.e. chicks that have not yet left the nest) per nest, and the numbers of runners (i.e. chicks that have left the nest, but are still unable to fly) were also recorded. The time of stay at each cay was sufficient to allow a detailed search for nests.

The numbers of nesting pairs of birds at a cay has been calculated as being equal to the number of nests with eggs or a chick plus the number of runners present on the island. This assumes one nest per runner.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the species observed in 1983 (nine cays) and 1984 (seven cays) and their breeding status. Fifteen species were observed of which eight were breeding in one or both years. In 1983 thirteen species were observed, seven of which were breeding and in 1984 fourteen species were observed, seven of which were breeding. Twelve species were observed on both trips, and six of the species were breeding in both years.

TABLE 1

	Hixon	Sunray	Gan	nett	By1	und	Pr	ice	Gil	lett	Bac	chi	Tho	mas	Be	11
	Cay	Cay	0	ay	Ca	y	1 0	ay	1 0	ay	Ca	y	Ca	y	1 C	ay
its prists eller	83	83	83	84	83	84	83	84	83	84	83	84	83	• 84	83	84
Masked Booby		P	в	B	в	в	в	в	в	в	в		B	в	в	B
Brown Booby	P	P	в	В	В	В	B	В	В	В	В	B	B	В	в	в
Least Frigatebird				- P											В	в
White-faced Heron								Ρ		P						P
Lesser Golden Plove	г		P			P	P		P	P	12					
Tattler		1000														P
Ruddy Turnstone	Ρ	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P		1	P
Silver Gull	P	P	в	Ρ	в	P	B	B	P	В	P	В	В	В	P	В
Common Tern	P	P	P	Ρ	P	Ρ	P					Ρ	and a	Ρ		
Roseate Tern		1.	P	P			P				P		100			
Black-naped Tern	Ρ	P	P	Ρ	P	Ρ	P		B	Ρ	P	Ρ		Ρ		
Bridled Tern											-				P	в
Crested Tern	P	P	P	P	в	P	в	В	P	P	P	P	в	B	B	в
Lesser Crested Tern							P		1							
Common Noddy	P	P	P	P	1	and a	B	Ρ		В	P	P	P	P	B	В

Birds observed on cays of the Swain Reefs. "B" denotes breeding and "P" not breeding.

The numbers of pairs of nesting seabirds recorded from the cays visited in 1984 and the total numbers for these cays recorded in November 1979 by Limpus and Lyon (1981) are given in Table 2.

TABLE 2

Number of pairs of nesting seabirds recorded from Gannet, Bylund, Price, Gillett, Thomas, Bacchi and Bell Cays in November 1979 by Limpus and Lyon (1981) and in July 1984 in the present study. An * denotes that an estimate has been used in the total.

	July 1984	November 1979
Masked Booby	31	238
Brown Booby	78	444
Least Frigatebird	132	44
Silver Gull	15	8
Roseate Tern	0	2
Black-naped Tern	0	200*
Bridled Tern	2	700-900*
Crested Tern	198	582*
Lesser Crested Tern	0	9
Common Noddy	16	920-1620*

For most species there were more nesting pairs in November 1979 than in July 1984. The two exceptions are the Silver Gull and Least Frigatebird. The numbers of Gulls were about the same, while in July 1984 there were many more Frigate 1-1 birds.

Annotated species list

Masked Booby Sula dactylatra. Widely dispersed, present and breeding on seven cays. Breeding stages ranged from eggs to fledged immature birds. For the seven cays visited in 1984 a total of 16 nests with eggs were observed. There were one or two eggs per nest ($\bar{x} = 1.4$). Only one chick per nest was observed. Fifteen nestlings and runners were seen.

Brown Booby Sula leucogaster. Widely dispersed being present on all cays and breeding on all except Hixon and Sunray. Breeding stages ranged from eggs to fledged immature birds. In 1984 a total of 41 nests with eggs were observed. There were one or two eggs per nest ($\bar{x} = 1.5$). Only one chick per nest was ever observed. Thirty-seven nestlings and runners were seen. Least Frigatebird Frigata ariel. Recorded breeding only on Bell Cay though irregularly seen throughout the reef complex. In 1984 there were 130 nestlings (one per nest) and two nests with one egg each. In 1983 breeding was not so far advanced, chicks were smaller and eggs were more common.

White-faced Heron Ardea novaehollandiae. This species was not observed in 1983 but four specimens were seen in 1984. All were seen when the tide was over the reef flats, either roosting on beach rocks or flying over the cays.

Lesser Golden Plover Pluvialis dominica. Occasional individuals observed on beaches of cays.

Ruddy Turnstone Arenaria interpres. Individuals or small flocks were frequently encountered on beach rocks or on the beaches. Some specimens were observed feeding on the eggs of nesting birds in the centre of Bell Cay in 1984.

Tattler Tringa sp. One small flock observed roosting on beach rock.

Silver Gull Larus novaehollandiae. Always observed at cays, and found breeding in one or both years on all cays except Hixon and Sunray. All stages of development from eggs to downy chicks were present. In 1984 eight nests were observed with eggs (clutch size 1-3 eggs; $\bar{x} = 2.0$). Seven runners were also seen.

Common Tern Sterna hirundo. Frequently encountered, often in large flocks, resting on beaches in the company of other terns.

Roseate Tern Sterna dougalli. Occasional specimens seen resting on beaches in the company of other terns.

Black-naped Tern Sterna sumatrana. Commonly found resting on beaches in large flocks, which include other terns. In 1983 observed breeding on Gillette Cay with runners present. Not observed breeding in 1984.

Bridled Tern Sterna anaethetus. Only observed at Bell Cay (one in 1983, thirteen in 1984). In 1984 two nests each with one egg were found on vegetation adjacent to a Crested Tern colony.

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Crested Tern Sterna bergü. Encountered on all cays, either resting on beaches or in flight. Recorded breeding on half of the cays visited. Breeding stages present ranged from eggs to fledged young. In 1984 175 nests with one egg each were observed and 23 nestlings and runners.

Lesser Crested Tern Sterna bengalensis. Thirty specimens observed in 1983 amongst Crested Terns on Price Cay.

Common Noddy Anous stolidus. Frequently encountered resting on beaches, flying over islands or attending unused nest sites in the centres of some cays. Recorded breeding on Bell Cay in 1983 and 1984, on Price Cay in 1983 and on Gillette Cay in 1984. Breeding stages present in 1983 ranged from small downy chicks to nearly fledged young. In 1984 eggs were also present. For the seven cays visited in 1984 six nests with eggs were observed and 10 runners. Many birds were observed courting at nesting sites.

DISCUSSION

The absence of Shearwaters Pu_{00} inus spp. and the presence of Common Terns were the only differences between the seabird communities observed by me in winter and those recorded in summer by Limpus and Lyon (1981). However, numbers of Common Noddies, Roseate, Bridled and Lesser Crested Terns appeared much lower in the winter counts.

All species of seabirds which were found nesting in winter were also recorded during summer breeding on the Swain Reef cays (Limpus and Lyon 1981). Therefore these observations do not support Limpus and Lyon's suggestion that in winter different species of terns may nest on these cays.

Limpus and Lyon recorded two species (Roseate and Lesser Crested Terns) breeding during summer that were not found breeding in winter. Neither of these species was common, having two and nine nesting pairs respectively and the differences may be due to chance rather than season. The lower numbers of Least Frigatebirds in summer can be explained by these having fledged at the time when Limpus and Lyon visited the Swain Reefs.

Four species (Common Noddy and Bridled, Black-naped and Crested Terns) found breeding during winter on the cays of the

December 1985

Swain Reefs were nesting outside their breeding seasons given by Beruldsen (1980) and Hitchcock (1976). (Table 3).

TABLE 3

Nesting seasons for terms recorded by Hitchcock (1976) and Beruldsen (1980).

		HITCHCOCK	BERULDSEN
Bridled Tern		Sept - Nov	Sept - Nov
Black-naped Tern		Sept - Jan	Sept - Dec
Crested Tern		Sept - Dec	Oct - Feb
Comman Noddy		Sept - Nov	Aug – Jan
	å	Mar - May	& Mar – Jun

This highlights the need for the collection of more information on the nesting of seabirds on the Swain Reefs for the development of management plans for the future conservation of seabirds in the area.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Funding of the 1984 field trip was made available by the Marine Sciences and Technology grant of Prof. H. Heatwole, Dr. P. Saenger, Dr. P. Flood and Dr. R. Simpson. I am grateful to Prof. Heatwole and Dr. Saenger for making both field trips possible and for comments on the draft manuscript. Thanks are also due to Sue Mathews for typing the manuscript.

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SUMMER WADER COUNTS ON TRYON ISLAND, CAPRICORN GROUP

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Tryon Island is one of the smaller cays in the Capricorn Group off the south coast of Queensland. Although a number of ornithologists have visited the island (see Kikkawa 1976) no data are apparently available for wader numbers on the island over a period of consecutive days. This, indeed, may be true for the Capricorn Group as a whole.

Since waders were a conspicuous element of the high tide avifauna of Tryon during our stay there, we decided to count the number of each species at high and low tide each day. In obtaining such counts we hoped to determine whether there were daily changes in wader numbers, whether these numbers were influenced by changing heights of the tide and to what extent the island itself was used as a wader feeding ground.

METHODS

Tryon Island (23°15'S, 151°47'E) is a sand cay of approximately 600 x 100 m, dominated by *Pisonia grandis* forest, and surrounded by a platform reef covering c. 2 km^2 (Mather & Bennett 1978).

Counts of waders were made at high and low tide each day from 16-23 January, and for high tide only on 24 January, 1985. Tide times were determined from Tide Tables for Gladstone (computed for the Department of Harbours and Marine, Brisbane) and adjusted for Tryon.

At high tide most species roosted on the beach near the water-line and were easy to count, particularly on the open, sandy spit on the west point of the island. One observer surveyed this area and two surveyed the main roost at the densely vegetated east end. Grey-tailed Tattlers Tringa breviceps usually roosted here in stands of Tournefortia argentea shrubs where they were impossible to count accurately. We therefore flushed them and either counted them in flight or when they settled in the more open branches and canopy of Casuarina equisetifolia trees. These trees were also often used by Whimbrel Numenius phaeopus. Ruddy Turnstones Arenaria interpres and Lesser Golden Plovers Pluvialis dominica sometimes stood beneath shrubs at the top of the beach.

Two observers, walking in opposite directions around the island, sufficed for counts at low tide. The island's low tide area was defined as being above the lower limit of the sandy beach but also included an area of beachrock at the southwest corner.

Casual observations, made at other times of day, of less commonly recorded species are also incorporated in the study.

RESULTS

The data are presented in Table 1. The Grey-tailed Tattler and Ruddy Turnstone were much more numerous than any other species. Their numbers at high tide varied respectively from 180-240 and 69-104. Numbers of the Lesser Golden Plover were fairly constant except for one count of 9, but those of the Mongolian Plover Charadrius mongolus peaked at 43 on 18 January and declined to zero for the last four days of the study period. The five remaining species, Red-necked Stint Calidris ruficollis, Whimbrel, Bar-tailed Godwit Limosa lapponica, Eastern Curlew Numenius madagascariensis and Pied Oystercatcher Haematopus longirostris, were not recorded every day and no count exceeded seven birds.

Many fewer birds were recorded at low tide. For the Tattler and Turnstone low tide counts averaged only 1% and 11% respectively of high tide counts on the same day. The island area, as defined for the study, was little used by waders as a feeding ground. Daily changes in heights of the tide appear to have had no influence on wader numbers since for no species are there antithetic trends of changing numbers before and after the days of the highest tides, 20 and 21 January.

DISCUSSION

Before our high tide counts, and well after the reef surrounding Tryon had been submerged by the rising tide, we often noticed flocks of Tattlers and Turnstones arriving on Tryon from the direction of North-West Island. We were able to see them approaching from far beyond the fringe of the Tryon reef, which was easily visible from the shore, so it seems

TABLE 1

High (H) and Low (L) tide counts of waders on Iryon Island, January 1985. Figures in brackets refer to casual observations and those in boxes to the highest count for each species.

						_				_					_		
January	16		17		18		19		20		21		22		23		24
Tide	н	L	н	L	н	L	н	L	н	L	н	L	н	L	н	L	н
Tidel height m	3.39	1.43	3.40	1.27	3.44	1.11	4.32	0.99	4.39	0.92	4.39	0.90	4.33	0.94	4.22	1.02	4.07
Grey-teiled Tattler	187	2	240	3	205	4	224	2	180	1	185	1	204	2	224	1	235
Ruddy Turnstone	100	26	85	16	104	7	79	4	69	7	72	3	88	7	94	8	102
Lesser Golden Plover	23	0	9	0	24	0	17	0	21	D	21	O	18	0	19	0	25
Mongolian Plover	4	0	32	O	43	0	11	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Red-necked Stint	1	0	0	0	3	O	4	O	3	0	2	O	1	0	1	0	1
Whimbrel	1	0	0	0	1	0	7	o	3	0	4	0	2	0	3	0	1
8sr-tailed Godwit	0	0	O	(2)	0	(1)	٥	O	0	0	0	D	0	0	o	(1)	٥
Eastern Curlew	0	111	0	(1)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Pied Oystercatcher	0	2	. 0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

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reasonable to suggest that these birds had been feeding on the North-West Island reef. Since much of this very extensive reef (covering c. 38 km^2 according to Mather & Bennett 1978) is actually closer to Tryon than to North-West Island itself, Iryon was presumably a more convenient roost site. Future study could investigate whether there is a correlation between the area and/or perimeter of a reef and the number of waders feeding on it. If such a correlation does exist, and attention is paid to our finding that birds roosting on one island may have been feeding on the reef surrounding another, it might eventually be possible to predict the wader holding capacity of each of the reefs in the Capricorn Group.

More needs to be known about wader movements within the Group. While we have confidence in the thoroughness and accuracy of our counts, we see no ready explanation for the daily changes in numbers of each species of wader on Tryon. In view of such changes and the unknown extent of interisland movement, it would clearly be incorrect to extrapolate from single day counts for islands in order to estimate the total numbers of waders present in the Capricorn Group.

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TWO NEW RECORDS OF THE SHORT-TAILED SHEARWATER FROM NORTH QUEENSLAND

N.W. LONGMORE

In September 1984 a shearwater was received from Cairns (16°56'S, 145°46'E) by the Queensland Museum. The bird had been alive though unwell when it was left with the donor on an unspecified date. Another specimen was located at Townsville (19°15'S, 146°48'E) on 19 November, 1984 by A. Haffenden of the Queensland National Parks and Wildlife Service. This bird was found in an emaciated condition and it also failed to survive. Both proved to be Short-tailed Shearwaters Puffinus tenuirostris.

Previous to these two birds the only record from northern Queensland related to a Short-tailed Shearwater collected at Coquette Point (17°31'S, 146°04'E) on 14 December, 1973 (Baker & Gill 1974). According to Blakers *et al* (1984) in the five year period of the Atlas study this Shearwater had been found along the eastern Australian seaboard only as far north as Fraser Island.

Weather conditions prevailing when the Townsville bird was collected indicate that the area was experiencing "strong south-easterlies which extended across the Tasman and Coral Seas to New Caledonia and the North Island of New Zealand" (A. Haffenden pers. comm.). Further data on the two specimens are given in the Appendix.

I wish to acknowledge the assistance of Mr & Mrs T. Magarry and W. Felton of Cairns, and A. Haffenden of Townsville in the provision of the specimens and data concerning them. Dr. G.M. Storr provided the reference to the species past occurrence in north Queensland.

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APPENDIX

MEASUREMENTS OF THE SHORT-TAILED SHEARWATER

QM 0.24275 Location: Cairns. Male; weight 283 g, total length 348 mm, wingspan 912 mm, wing 254 mm, tail 78 mm, total head 79.3 mm, culmen (to skull) 43.4 mm, tarsus 51.0 mm; skull hard, gonads small.

QM 0.25652 Location: Townsville. Female; weight 301 g, total length 386 mm, wingspan 938 mm, wing 262 mm, tail 85 mm, total head 81.0 mm, culmen (to skull) 36.3 mm, tarsus 51.1 mm; skull hard, gonads small.

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BOOK REVIEW

AUSTRALIAN PARROTS - A FIELD AND AVIARY STUDY by B.R. Hutchins and R.H. Lovell, 1985. Melbourne: The Aviculture Society of Australia. Pp xv1 + 185, 40 distribution maps. \$18.00 which includes postage. (Individual copies available from the Book Steward: Mr. J.E. Buchan, 14 Driftwood Drive, Glen Waverley, Vic. 3150.)

Many members of the Queensland Ornithological Society may feel a certain disquiet at the idea of keeping birds in cages. However, it must be admitted that this may be the only way of preserving species which otherwise would be in danger of extinction. The lifespan of a well cared for bird, caged in a roomy aviary, is often far longer than that of a wild bird and bird keeping gives many people a good deal of pleasure.

This book is aimed at the keeper and breeder of parrots, someone who wishes to find out more about the birds he already knows in his cages. In it, Barry Hutchins and the late Bob Lovall give detailed coverage to just 36 of the approximately 53 species of Australian parrots. It is a revision of a series of papers originally published in "Bird Keeping in Australia" in the seventies. The omission of the Budgerygar, some other parrots, and all the cockatoos must limit its use as a reference book but it does cover the subspecies of the birds described. All the birds are given distribution maps but these do not appear to have been revised in line with the Atlas of Australian Birds and so are sometimes inaccurate; for example the map for the Red-winged Parrot shows the Queensland distribution several hundred kilometres too far west. In fairness the Atlas probably came out too late for the data to be incorporated.

The "Field" part of the title is really a little misleading as it is a book for bird keepers, not bird watchers. Lacking coloured plates or other illustrations it is of little aid in field identification or the study of bird behaviour in the wild. It also perhaps assumes too much knowledge for a beginner aviculturalist to find it very digestible but there are good sections on cage construction and the care of sick birds. The use of common names for subspecies, such as "Bluecheeked Rosella" for a subspecies of the Pale-headed Rosella, may also be confusing for a novice. However, despite some reservations, this book would be a very useful supplement to an Australian bird library.

TIM MURPHY

MYSTERY PHOTOGRAPH

It should be apparent that this bird is Ouail-like and hence the only possible contenders are the true Ouail Coturnix sp, Button-guail Turnix sp. Plains-wanderer Pedionomus torquatus and perhaps a young Plover Charadriidae. However, the nature of the breast markings, bill shape and eye colour guickly eliminate any thought of Ployer or true Ouail.



Some of the Button-quail have contrasting marks on the breast such as Red-Backed T. maculosa and male Black-breasted T. melano gaster. However, neither of these species possess the deep horse-shoe shaped markings so evident on this bird.

These markings are however, characteristic of the identity of this bird, an adult male Plains-wanderer. This bird was photographed in the Riverina, south-western New South Wales in December, 1982.

TONY PALLISER

Mystery Photograph 8. Identify the species. Answer next issue

