

The Birds of George's Rocks, Mt. William National Park, Tasmania

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Summary

George's Rocks is described and information given on the geology, botany, history and birds recorded over a period of 7 years.

Description

George's Rocks, 40° 55' S.Lat.; 43° 23' E.Long., is a cluster of small islands, eight in number, situated eight kilometres NNW of Eddystone Point lighthouse in NE Tasmania. The name appears in various forms, King George Rocks, St. George Rocks, St. George Rock, and George Rock on various charts since that of Flinders in 1814, but has appeared as George's Rocks, its present official name, on most maps produced this century.

The following names are in local use for the eight islands (taken from North to South): Top Rock, Tugboat (two parts), Bird Island, Outer Rock, George's Island, Cauliflower Rock, and Gannet Rock. George's Island is the largest having an estimated area of 1.5 ha, Bird Island is estimated at 0.5 ha, while Outer Rock would be approximately 0.2 ha. These are the only islands to carry soil, the others being totally rocky without vegetation.

The whole area is hazardous to navigation and there have been several shipwrecks (O'May, undated (1955)). Eddystone Point lighthouse was built in 1889.

Over the years there have been two huts built on George's Island for use by fishermen as temporary base. Both are now completely demolished, the latter being burned some years ago.

Rabbits have been released on George's Island and are now very numerous as also is the house rat.

The geology is characterised by the contacts between two different granites. Fragments of diorite (a dark rock) are emplaced along the contact, which is also marked by the accumulation of the mineral garnet within the granite (Jennings, pers. comm.).

The vegetation is all low, the maximum height of any shrub being approximately one metre.

The following were collected and submitted to the Queen Victoria Museum, Launceston, for identification. From George's Island and Outer Rock; *Leucopogon parviflorus*, *Muehlenbeckia adpressa*, *Sagina maritima*, *Carpobrotus* sp., and *Poa* sp. From Bird Island, *Carpobrotus* sp., *Microsorium diversifolium*, *Tetragonia implexicome*, *Crassula sieberiana*, *Pelargonium australe*, *Sonchus* sp., and *Senecio capillifolius*. The last species occurs only on Bass Strait islands.

Landing is easy in calm weather, on any of the islands carrying breeding colonies, but considerable local experience is desirable as the area is hazardous because of many hidden rocks and reefs. George's Island has two small sandy beaches, but on all other islands the landings must be made onto rocks.

George's Rocks was proclaimed a State Reserve under the National Parks and Wildlife Act 1970, on March 25, 1975, and is included in the Mt. William National Park.

List of Birds

The following notes on the birds were compiled from our observations made between November 4, 1970 and November 16, 1977. During this period fourteen visits have been made by one or both of us and R. H. Green has kindly provided his observations made during a visit from November 12 to November 16, 1977. All visits have been made between August 31 and January 12. No literature references to the birds of George's Rocks are known to the authors.

Little Penguin. Breeds on George's Island, Outer Rock and Bird Island in burrows and under rocks. Birds have been noted brooding eggs as early as September 17, and by end of November all nests have large young.

Short-tailed Shearwater. A small colony of about 20 pairs nest each year on the eastern side of George's Island.

White-faced Storm-petrel. This species is very common in Tasmanian waters and at George's Rocks it nests on George's Island, Outer Rock and Bird Island. The burrows were cleaned out ready for eggs when we visited on September 17, 1977. Although occasionally eggs have been recorded by as early as November 4, we have found most eggs are laid in the latter half of November. We are sure the presence of the house rat is most deleterious to this species.

Diving Petrel (*Pelecanoides urinatrix*). The discovery of a near-fledged young bird in a burrow on Bird Island on November 14, 1975, was the first indication that this early nesting species was nesting here. This was confirmed by a visit on August 31, 1976, when adults were found to be brooding eggs. The colony in the 1977 season was of about fifty pairs and was scattered over the higher parts of Bird Island.

Black Cormorant. This bird is often seen feeding in the area and resting on the rocks, but only in small numbers.

Little Pied Cormorant. Noted more frequently and in larger numbers than *P. carbo*, usually resting on the rocks.

Black-faced Cormorant. Each year this bird breeds at George's Rocks, but the site of the colony may vary annually from one islet to another. It has been recorded breeding on Top Rock, Tugboat, Outer Rock and Bird Island. The colony is usually of from twelve to twenty pairs and occupancy is extended over several months. In 1971 by September some young had fledged, while on September 17, 1977 eggs were still being brooded.

White-faced Heron. Single birds are occasionally seen feeding in the inter tidal zones of the larger islands.

Swamp Harrier. Occasionally one of these birds is to be seen over these islands, no doubt on the lookout for eggs chicks or rabbits.

Pied Oyster-catcher. Scarce at George's Rocks, two being the greatest number seen at any one time. Very numerous on the nearby beaches of the Tasmanian mainland.

Sooty Oyster-catcher. Present on every visit made to the area. Two pairs nest every year on Bird Island.

Hooded Dotterel. Occasionally this species nests on one of the beaches on George's Island, but it has not been recorded outside the breeding season.

Red-capped Plover. Sometimes seen on George's Island beaches but not been found breeding.

Ruddy Turnstone. Each summer these birds occur in good numbers.

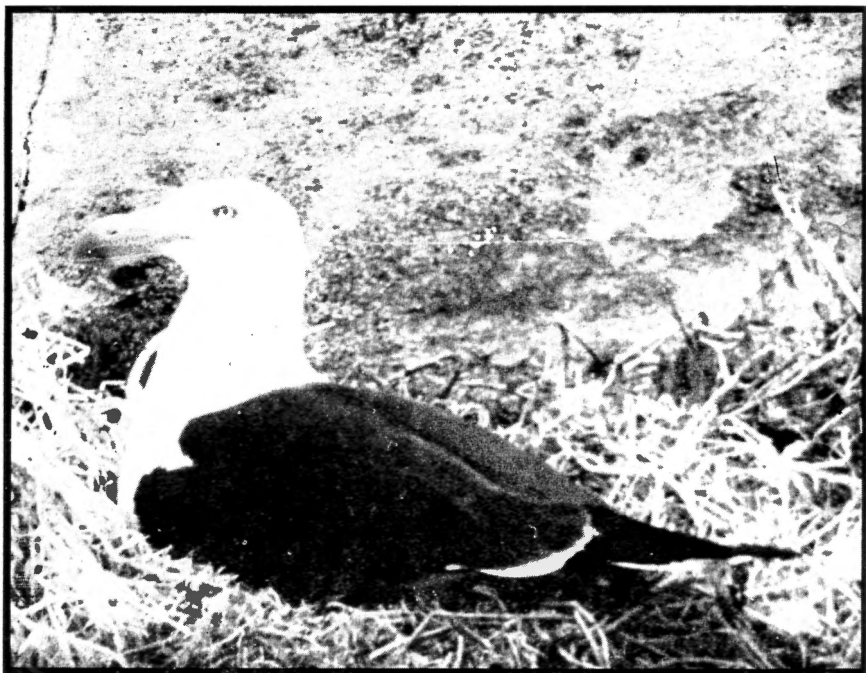


Plate 13

Pacific Gull and eggs, Bird Island.

Photo by J. R. Napier



Plate 14

Caspian Tern and eggs, Bird Island.

Photo by J. R. Napier

They were particularly numerous on September 17, 1977, many individuals still showing traces of breeding plumage.

Eastern Curlew. One may be seen frequently feeding on the beaches and in the rock pools on George's Island.

Silver Gull. Each year a breeding colony forms, usually on George's Island or Outer Rock, but in 1973 a large colony used Bird Island.

Pacific Gull. Five pairs usually breed each year on Bird Island, the eggs being laid in early November (see Plate 13).

Caspian Tern. One pair nests each year on Bird Island, the eggs being laid in early November (see Plate 14).

Crested Tern. Until 1976 Crested Terns had been found nesting only on Bird Island, where each year a small colony would form in November. However in 1976, in addition to Bird Island, a very large colony formed on the eastern end of George's Island. It was estimated to have about 2000 pairs and was forming on November 22. On January 12, 1977 there were both eggs and young. This colony formed again in mid-November 1977, there being about 200 eggs on November 15 and an increasing numbers of birds (see Plate 15).

Fairy Tern. Seen each year in the area, but no nesting has been recorded on the islands. Some years it nests on beaches on the nearby mainland.

Richard's Pipit. George's Island has an acceptable habitat for this species. We have seen it there, and it would not surprise us to find it breeding.

White-fronted Chat. Frequently seen on George's Island where the habitat appears to be suitable but no nests have been found or breeding suspected.

Starling. A pair nest each year in a crevice on Bird Island.

Forest Raven. These birds visit from the mainland and raid the nesting colonies each year. It is not unusual to see up to four.

Birds seen at sea

The following birds have been seen while crossing to George's Rocks from the coastline, a trip of about twenty to thirty minutes in a small boat with outboard motor:

- Wandering Albatross
- Black-browed Albatross
- Shy Albatross
- Yellow-nosed Albatross
- Southern Giant Petrel
- Cape Petrel
- Fairy Prion
- Australian Pelican
- Australian Gannet
- White-breasted Sea-eagle
- Arctic Skua

Discussion

George's Rocks is an area similar to many of the smaller islands in the Furneaux Group, Bass Strait, and its avifauna may be expected to be almost identical. The land area, being very small, excludes practically all but sea birds and a few predators. However, we feel that it supports a most interesting and relatively large number of breeding sea bird species. There are no rare species but the twelve found breeding on these islets is probably a higher number than for any other Tasmanian bird island.



Crested Tern colony, George's Island.

Plate 15

Photo by J. R. Napier

The Diving Petrel is the most interesting in that there are no other known colonies close by. Other colonies of this species recorded in Tasmanian waters are at the Kent Group in eastern Bass Strait, Black Pyramid in western Bass Strait (Green & McDonald, 1963), and at Maatsuyker Island in the south of the state (Green & Mollison, 1961; Milledge, 1972; Milledge & Brothers, 1976). The colony must be very near its maximum on Bird Island as the area of soil is very limited. Future observers should watch for an extension onto George's Island where there is ample soil and apparent opportunity.

The Short-tailed Shearwater colony has not extended during the period of our observations, and is the smallest ever seen by us. In spite of much searching no colonies of the Fairy Prion could be found.

It is certain that further observation will expand this birdlist. Additional migrants will no doubt be recorded as well as other predators and passerines visiting from the nearby mainland.

The list of sea birds to be seen during the crossing doubtless can be extended by further observation.

We have undertaken this study with two main objectives in mind. To place on record the birds at George's Rocks, and to give a base for further study as we feel it is an important sea bird island group.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Mr. I. Jennings of the Tasmanian Department of Mines for notes on the geology of George's Rocks and to the Nomenclature Board of Tasmania for the historical notes on the naming of George's Rocks and references to the area on various charts. Mr. R. H. Green of the Queen Victoria Museum, Launceston, kindly arranged the identification of plant specimens, gave much encouragement and suggestions about the study and, read the draft of this paper.

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[Considering the relatively small areas of the islets of George's Rocks, an acceptable and well-planned rat-eradication programme ought to be considered to reduce predation on the small burrowing petrel species — Hon. Editor.]

ABW

Additional Records of Birds from La Trobe University

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Several new species of birds have been recorded on or over the campus since the last published list (Zann, 1976). These 26 additions bringing the recorded total to 150 as at November 30, 1978.

The list of new species follows:

	Ref.	Area	Occ.	Max. Nos.	Obs.
Australian Pelican	X	O	C	15	S
Hoary-headed Grebe		W	S	2	S
Great Crested Grebe		O	O	1	ST
Cattle Egret	X	O	S	16	S
Plumed Egret		O	S	1	PV
Royal Spoonbill	X	W,O	O	1	S
Australian Spotted Crake		W	O	1	GA
Peaceful Dove		O	O,E	1	PV
Musk Lorikeet	X	A	I	—	S
Little Lorikeet	X	A	I	—	S
Long-billed Corella		O	R,E	8	PV
Port Lincoln Parrot	X	A	R,E	1	S
Budgerygah		A	R,E	1	S
Golden Bronze Cuckoo	X	O	O	1	GA
Rose Robin			R	1	S
Rufous Songlark	X	W	S	1	S
White-throated Warbler		W	O	2	GA
Yellow-tufted Honeyeater		O	S	1	S
Little Friarbird		W	O	1	GA
Crescent Honeyeater		O	O	1	CB
Tawny crowned Honeyeater		O	S	1	S
Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater		W	S	2	S
Chestnut-breasted Finch		W,O	S,E	6	S
Spice Finch	X	O	O,E	2	PV
Grey Currawong		W	O	1	GA
Australian Raven		A	R	2	ST,PV