

Forgotten Feathers

Notes on the Fauna of King Island from the Logbooks of the "Lady Nelson."

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King Island in Bass Strait was discovered by Mr. Reid in the schooner "Martha" in 1799. It was not, however, named until January, 1801, when Captain Black, of the "Harbinger," met with it on his way through the straits, and named it after Governor King of New South Wales.

The "Harbinger" was the second ship to pass through Bass Strait on a voyage from England to Sydney, having been preceded in the previous month, December, 1800, by the "Lady Nelson" under Lieutenant Grant. The "Lady Nelson" was a small ship of 60 tons lent by the Admiralty to the Government of New South Wales for purposes of exploration. She is best known as the ship in which Murray discovered Port Phillip, but that she played a very important part in exploration and development in early days is evident from a perusal of her log-books, which have recently been published by Mrs. Marriott.*

Earlier on the same voyage on which Port Phillip was discovered, the "Lady Nelson" visited King Island and surveyed its east coast. Lieutenant Murray makes several allusions in his log to the animals and birds of the island, and as these contain references to the extinct Emu it seems important to bring them under the notice of ornithologists. Up to the present it has generally been supposed that the account given by the French naturalist, Peron, who visited the island eleven months later, was the only written evidence about this interesting extinct bird. On Saturday, January, 9th, 1802, Murray notes: "Saw the loom of the land from the masthead, which I take to be Governor King's Island."

January 11th. "I now went on shore, found a good deal of surf on the beach till we got on the southern side. . . . Here we landed, and the first thing we saw was a number of sea elephants of an immense size lying asleep on the beach, each of them, Barnes, the boatswain's mate told me, would make eight or nine barrels of oil; as we rowed down the shore we took them to be bluish rocks. We found along this beach two fresh water lagoons full of those animals which made it taste brackish. . . . We could not get near the upper part of them on account of the number of elephants playing in them both. I named the bay Elephant Bay from this circumstance."

[The Sea Elephant (*Macrorhinus leoninus*), the most remarkable seal of the southern hemisphere, has long been extinct in

* The Logbooks of the "Lady Nelson" with the Journal of her first commander Lieutenant James Grant, R.N., by Ida Lee, F.R.G.S. (Mrs. Charles Bruce Marriott). Grafton & Co., London, 1915.

Australian waters, though still surviving at Macquarie Island and other Antarctic islands.—W.B.A.]

January 12th. "Boat returned on board. They caught four badgers [wombats] and saw several kangaroos, but were not able to get any from the thickness of the brush. They also found feathers of Emus and a dead one. Snakes are here, as the skin of one was found. We got several gallons of elephant oil out to-day as a specimen to Government and for our own use."

January 17th. "Mr. Bowen [first mate] came off; he brought on board three seals with hair of prime fur, and told me there was a vast quantity on shore. Elephants are also in abundance, and the woods full of kangaroos, emmues (sic), badgers, etc. Some few shells were found. . . . After dinner I went on shore. The brush is very thick, which rendered it impossible to get any way in. There is little doubt of plenty of water being here as we in our search started 15 or 20 kangaroos from 30 to 40 pounds weight. An Emu was caught by the dog about 50 lbs. weight and surprising fat. At one place on this beach an acre of ground at least was covered with elephants of a most amazing size, and several were all along the beach and playing in the water. . . . I named this last discovery the Bay of Seats from the number of these animals on the shores of it."

January 19th. "A wambuck (sic) was caught; served it, a swan and a kangaroo to ship's company."

January 22nd. "Close to the Elephant Rock . . . This rock is about $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles in circumference, and it is entirely covered with seals of prime fur, some of which the officer brought. There might be 6 or 7000 seals of different sizes on shore."

January 23rd. "I was told that the Rock was full of Mutton-birds; in consequence of this I had the boat on shore, and procured 80 or 90 of them; served ditto to the people."

January 24th. "We took leave of this large and fine island where the benevolent hand of Providence has fixed the chief necessaries of life and the means to procure some of its luxuries."

Murray's report of the abundance of seals and sea elephants on King Island led the sealers from Port Jackson to visit it very promptly, for, as we know, when the French ships visited it at the end of the same year sealers were already at work there, and it was from them that Peron obtained his account of the King Island Emus, which they were utilising for food. Professor L. Brasil published Peron's notes in an article in *The Emu*, vol. xiv., p. 88 (1914). One of Peron's questions to the sealers (No. 6) was: "What is the largest size they attain?" The answer being, "In King Island almost $4\frac{1}{2}$ feet; they are smaller than in Sydney." (7) "What is the weight of the bird then?" "The heaviest weighs from 45 to 50 pounds." As we have seen, the one caught by Murray's dog was "surprising fat" and weighed 50 pounds: an interesting confirmation of this statement.