

A Visit to Mud Island

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At the beginning of December, 1928, a week-end spent on Mud Island, Port Phillip Bay, provided opportunity to ascertain the condition of the rookeries of the White-faced Storm Petrel (*Pelagodroma marina*). Not having been there previously, we were unable, after our visit, to speak of the state of the rookeries from a comparative point of view with earlier accounts, but we were assured by the fisherman who sailed us across to the island, and who is constantly in the neighbourhood of the place, that they are extending. This opinion appears to be corroborated by the statements of others who have visited the island previously and whose accounts of the extent of the rookeries at those times indicated a smaller area than is the case at present. In an article by Messrs. A. G. Campbell and A. H. Mattingley in *The Emu* in 1907* the burrows were estimated at one to the square yard, but now they are considerably closer together than that.

The principal rookery is on the centre strip of strand, which, forming a kind of subsidiary islet, runs between the sides of the horseshoe-shaped, or more properly, nearly circular, main island, and from which it is separated by shallow lagoons one on each side. There are, however, fairly extensive areas riddled with nesting burrows on the eastern portion of the main island also. The Fisheries and Game Department has erected warning notice boards in prominent places emphasizing that the place is a sanctuary. Despite these notices, however, the "crew" of the fishing smack, immediately upon landing us, rushed over to the nearest rookery, and later returned to us with freshly-gathered eggs, evidently merely to demonstrate their ability to collect.

The rookeries were visited by us that night and surveyed more generally next day. The birds began to come in, in the evening, at a little before 9 p.m., at which hour, of course, it was quite dark, and they were scarcely visible at first except in the light of electric torches flashed upon them. But in half an hour the numbers had evidently increased considerably for spectral grey shapes were continually flashing before our eyes. The darkness, however, prevented our attempting an estimate of the number of birds coming in to the burrows. The Petrels were most timid, and made no attempt to escape when captured, but lay passive in the hands, seemingly overcome with fear until released—a contrast to the larger "Mutton Birds," or

*Vide *Emu*, Vol. 6, p. 185.

Short-tailed Shearwaters (*Puffinus tenuirostris*), which pugnaciously resent any attempt at capture.

The White-faced Storm Petrel lays but one egg, and at this time of the year they appeared to be well incubated. The burrows were from 18 to 30 inches long, and very narrow, but opening out into a larger chamber at the end where the brooding bird sat. We did not make any observations of the time that the Petrels left the burrows again.

A pair of Swamp Harriers (*Circus approximans*) reigns on the island and appears to take toll of the Petrels, if the numbers of carcasses of those birds, especially under a tree continually frequented by the hawks, can be attributed to them. These birds, or their predecessors, have evidently inhabited the island for years, for accounts 20 odd years ago refer to them. Their nest was discovered by accident—a raised platform of large sticks about 2 feet high from the ground and containing two eggs, one bluish-white, the other white with the faintest suggestion of pink, and the two different in size. One of the birds swooped savagely at us when the nest was first discovered, but made no attempt to come near again until we left. The hoped-for opportunity of photographing the Harriers did not therefore occur.

Fairy Terns (*Sterna nereis*), carrying small silvery fish which glistened in the sun as the birds winged overhead, tempted us to follow them right across the centre islet and the eastern lagoon to the most easterly beach. There numbers of this species kept circling overhead, calling loudly, evidently in protest at our intrusion. On occasions they would alight and the birds bringing the fish would feed them to numbers of other Terns that were congregated on the beach. The recipients, we considered at first, to be fully-grown young birds, but possibly they were females, for the feeding of fishes by the males to the females is, I believe, one of the incidents of Fairy Tern courtship. We were unable to settle this matter with certainty. The Fairy Tern appears to have two broods in the season, usually, and the nesting period is from November to February. Even assuming, however, that the birds being fed were young of a very early brood, they would hardly have advanced, by the beginning of December, to such a stage as would permit them to fly on such strong wings as did these birds when we disturbed them, the whole flock then flying out to sea together. Perhaps a contemplated further visit will throw some light on the matter.

In the reeds and samphire bushes on the western side of the island the Little Grassbird (*Megalurus gramineus*) was,

judging from its continuous calling, exceptionally common, although very rarely was a bird put up for a length of time sufficient to enable a careful scrutiny. They called far into the night, their melancholy evening vespers continuing long after most bird notes had ceased. Other inhabitants of the scrubby sand dunes were Grey-backed Silvereyes (*Zosterops halmaturina*), White-fronted Chats (*Epthianura albifrons*) and the introduced Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*). Welcome Swallows (*Hirundo neoxena*) skimmed overhead, whilst the beaches and lagoons and small swampy areas amongst the samphire were thronged with numerous migratory birds, principally Sharp-tailed Sandpipers (*Erolia acuminata*).

The following is a list of all birds, not already mentioned, seen on or around the island:—Arctic Skua (*Stercorarius parasiticus*), Crested Tern (*Sterna bergii*), Caspian Tern (*Hydroprogne caspia*), Silver Gull (*Larus novæ-hollandiæ*), Pacific Gull (*Gabianus pacificus*), Gannet (*Sula serrator*), Black Swan (*Chenopsis atrata*), Pelican (*Pelecanus conspicillatus*), Black Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*), Eastern Curlew (*Numenius cyanopus*), Red-capped Dotterel (*Charadrius ruficapillus*), White-faced Heron (*Noto-phox novæ-hollandiæ*), Red-necked or Little Stint (*Erolia ruficollis*) and Pied Oyster-catcher (*Hæmatopus ostralegus*). In addition to these species Mr. M. S. Sharland, R.A.O.U., a member of the party, also identified the Eastern Golden Plover (*Pluvialis dominicus*) and the Grey Plover (*Squatarola squatarola*).

The Lesser Frigate-Bird: An Unusual Occurrence.—It will probably be of interest to members to know that a very fine specimen of the Lesser Frigate-Bird (*Fregata ariel*) was recently found at Carrum, in Port Phillip, and brought to the National Museum. The bird, which is a male in excellent plumage, was noticed by some young men flying low over the trees near the beach late in the evening of 13th April, and next morning was found dead, with the wings fully expanded, among the branches of the tea-tree bordering the beach. So far as could be ascertained there was nothing to indicate the cause of death. This is the second record of the occurrence of a Frigate-Bird in our bay. In 1861 a specimen of the Greater Frigate-Bird (*Fregata minor*) was found on the beach at Brighton. This is also a male and is in the museum collection.—JAS. A. KERSHAW, Director, National Museum.



The Lagoon, Mud Island.



White-faced Storm Petrel "walking" on the water.

Photos. by M. S. R. Sharland, R.A.O.U.